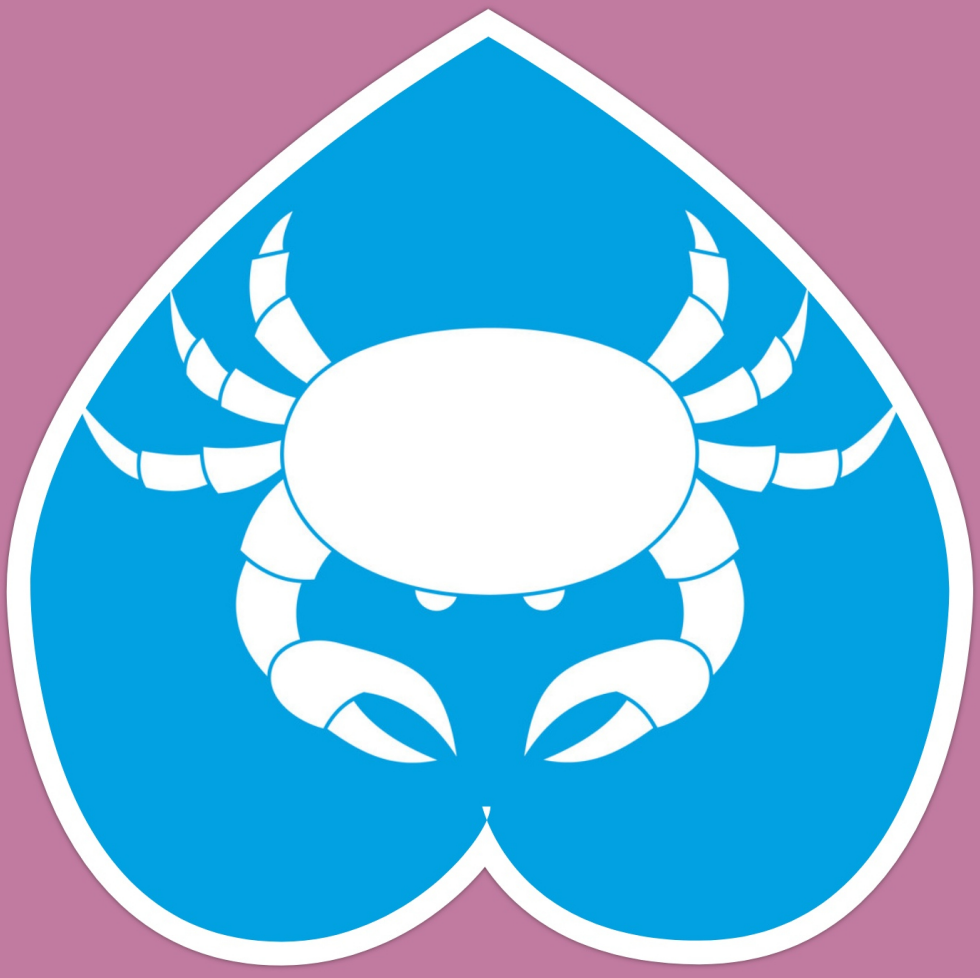

The Cult of Cancer

Apep Serpentine

The Cult of Cancer

Apep

Serpentine

---Prologue-The Declaration of Ezekiel---

On my knees, I raise my arms aloft, praying to the god that I have come to know is omnipresent and all-powerful. A god that shows mercy to no one. It is the offspring of terror, the ultimate weapon with which it rules the entire world.

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It lives in everything and everyone. It hides until it grows bored and strikes. Like a sadist, it pulls its victim into the grave slowly, torturing them with its presence and absolute power. It holds illimitable dominion over all lives beneath its shadow, and none can escape its relentless touch. It kills indiscriminately and without pause.

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So then, with the raw power and prevalence of a pantheistic deity, how else could it be known? I will seek to find solace in the fear that it instills by embracing the crawl of its armies, unending, unwavering, and unstoppable.

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A god is all it can be. It is the future of the world, and it knows it. It sees the fear and revels. It sees the paranoia surrounding all that it hides within, the frantic, clumsy efforts to eradicate it, and laughs.

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It is the absolute, the alpha predator, that which binds, tortures, and kills, it is the Dennis Raider of disease, and it will never, ever, stop.

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It is life, it is death, and it is God…

---Ezekiel---

Renley Echis had harbored carcinophobia for as long as he could remember, a sickness of the psyche that he could not escape. Article after article, product after product, victim after victim, comment after comment had pushed him further into a trench of paranoia and uncertainty surrounding the emperor of maladies, that thing that Renley had become convinced to fear, the thing that he found himself declaring God.

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The first railroad spikes of this path to perpetual terror were embedded several years earlier, upon his hearing of a celebrity being killed by cancer at 41. This comparatively young age was like a strike from a bayonet, a blade of steel that drove into him a spark of panic, a small granule of energy that rapidly cascaded upward into a blaze of unrelenting horror. He began to wonder, at the age of 22, how soon it would be before he, too, fell to this indiscriminate serial killer. Age could not shield him, it seemed, and so he was left paralyzed by fear. Later, he found the articles online, the copious lists of materials that, allegedly, caused cancer, from what he ate, to the air he breathed, to the clothes he wore, none of it seemed safe anymore, so he refused to eat any but a small selection of nutrient-poor foods, shunned the light of the sun and the environment outside of his small house in the city of Chicago, and forewent all clothing, as even the smallest amount of polyester would send him into a psychosomatic seizure. He was effectively cleaved from the world, cowering like a naked rat in a dungeon of his own design. He spoke to no one, he watched nothing, he looked at no screen, and he seldom even opened his eyes. He did, however, think, almost obsessively, to the point where his own thoughts were the only voices in his head that he could hear. They became an oppressive cacophony, a thick forest of names and theories, all surrounding that one monster, cancer. How could he escape it? He couldn't. How could he live with its existence? He couldn't. How could he die without its affliction? There was only one way to be sure that he wouldn't.

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But against all logic that he could produce, Renley did not take his own life, but instead surrendered it to what he called a "higher power", the only god that mattered. The only god that he could see, feel, and fear. Dropping to his knees and raising his arms aloft, he prayed to cancer itself, declaring it the one true god, as it was omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. It was everywhere, and within all people, and all that they had made. And fear was the only thing that could be rung from its dark toxic cloud, an oppressive shadow that hung over all.

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Rising to his feet, he recited the first prayer to cancer that he had articulated, *Dear Lord Carcinoma, I beg of thee, spare my life, so that I, Ezekiel, your loyal prophet, may make your*

message known by all. You are the almighty, my Lord, and I will be, forevermore, your faithful servant. In your name I pray, Amen.

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Words like tumor, malignant, and metastasis, along with their countless variations, became entries in Ezekiel's glossary of profanity, as none were permitted to speak them, lest they incur Lord Carcinoma's wrath upon their utterance of such powerful invocations, thus bringing his curse down upon themselves. Such was Carcinoma's due power and respect, that any words associated with him could never be allowed to be said in anything other than hushed whispers, almost as if to evade The Lord's ear. Even words, combinations of words, and punctuation marks that were otherwise completely unrelated to cancer became profaned, due to some tangential resemblance to something correlated towards the most feared and cursed disease on planet earth, colons and semicolons, banned due to those symbols being reminiscent of colon cancer and the subsequent surgery to remove it. Phrases like two-more, were barred from speech as well, due to its sounding like the word tumor. Ezekiel's fear, indeed, went far beyond anything directly connected to his god, or its handiwork in the mortal world. Of course, this gospel, among others, would be reserved for those who would be willing to listen to Ezekiel's good word, as he had accrued not a single adherent as of yet. His terror of the sun's rays, coupled with his distaste for the air, left him effectively voiceless anywhere outside of his dark little hovel. And so, he decided that in order to spread his message, to be his Lord's mouthpiece, he would need to bring his hovel with him.

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Strapping the apparatus to his face and back entailed some contact with "The Untouchable Things", namely hard plastic, circumventing this little caveat with a body glove of pure cotton, meticulously reviewing the tag over and over and over again, even though the information remained unaltered with every pass of his panicked orbits scanning the tiny strip of, probably, safe paper. The plastic apparatus, then, was pulled over his face and secured to his back from around his body. It was a rebreather unit, typically utilized by inconspicuously-minded divers to avoid the release of bubbles upon exhalation, for these rebreathers were equipped with technology that allowed the air their users expelled to be cycled, cleansed, and recirculated back into proper oxygen to be inhaled once again, all within the same closed system. The perfect tool for one who feared greatly to breathe beyond the confines of his wooden shuttle. Next, he shielded his entire body in a black cloak, so as to banish the rays of the sun. He then sleeved his hands in black gloves, pulled a hood over his head, and finally donned a pair of dark sunglasses, giving him the appearance of some monstrous science-fiction supervillain. However, he saw himself as anything but, convinced of his righteous message as he stepped out of his home for the first time in 9 long years.

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His first task was to gain attention from the fickle-minded masses. Standing atop a milk crate that he'd plucked from an alleyway, Ezekiel began his proclamations, calling all who feared cancer to heed his holy warnings, that anything they touched which was of human make could be cursed by Lord Carcinoma, the one true god, the one who lived in all things, and in all people. This elicited several responses from the crowd slowly coalescing around his little pulpit. His odd appearance did well to attract curious spectators from a wide radius, followed there by his own fear spreading like the disease he worshipped among those who stayed, and they all stayed, enraptured by this bizarre-looking man attempting desperately and enthusiastically to warn them about the risks and dangers posed by all that they came into contact with on a daily basis. For few things drew a larger crowd then stunning them with a cattle prod of fear, an activation of the amygdala that precipitated an attention-snatching response from any whose ears it stung, and the more whom fear commanded, the more legitimate the claims appeared to be, further fueling the fire of panic with the flammable fluid of manufactured validity. He told them of sugar and of dietary artifices. He told them of the air, of microplastics, and of the dangers of exposure to the sun, as if these things being inflicted upon one's person just a single time could give them the disease, or, as Ezekiel had taken to mythologizing it, Lord Carcinoma would lay his finger upon thee, and they would be "touched" by cancer, a caste-iron-brand that stuck from that moment on. For "The Touched" were never to be spoken to, unless, of course, they'd survived their curse, at which point they would become known as "The Bless'd", those who had been granted mercy by Lord Carcinoma, and were to be revered by the faithful adherents. A middle caste that the majority of people fell within, the baying throngs known as "The Unchosen", were yet to be either blessed or touched by cancer, as Ezekiel stated, those whose fates were yet to be decided by "Carcinoma's Coin-Toss", as if to tear away any semblance of agency from his audience, who began to frantically ask this odd, yet wise man which ones of them were most likely to see heads or tails. His response was like ice in their veins, *only God knows, but you, my friends, will never see your fates until the ends of your days, because only in death will any of us find liberation from our Lord's shadow.* The crowd went silent, then roared to life once again. Ezekiel had his congregation. Now, he needed his church.

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The location he settled on was that of an abandoned hospital, where it was, he stated to his followers, that their Lord hath first touched a man, and from whence they all could learn to praise he who ruled their lives with absolution. The remaining hospital beds, he declared, would be their altars, where those who wished to leave Carcinoma's Kingdom would be sacrificed, and where The Touched would linger under the watch of The Unchosen, awaiting Carcinoma's Coin-Toss, and pleading for their own lives to be met with mercy, a verdict that they believed to be sparingly granted. Any symptoms that "could" be tells of Carcinoma's touch, spoke Ezekiel, were to be treated as unnegotiable black spots of termination, as "The Lord did not make his presence known until it was too late to avoid it", and so, these potentially minor ailments were deemed as "precoursers" to The Touch of Cancer, and therefore, those afflicted with these symptoms were relegated to the hospital beds. Ezekiel proclaimed that God lived in all things, that nothing was safe from his presence, so all of the faithful would need to take immense precautions as they went about their daily lives. No meat, no sun, no sugar, no smoking, no

drinking, and no polyester or other “unnecessary” plastic, nothing that could draw any fingers of Carcinoma’s hand. And every member of the church was required to rid themselves of all of these things, and more, should their information be updated, which brought Ezekiel to his next proclamation, that all of them were to spread the “good word” and warn everyone they knew and cared for of the potential cancer-causing materials found in all things, and that anyone at any age could become Touched, and that their only solution was to join the Cult of Cancer, not as a marketing push, but as a necessary step towards salvation, as only the one true god decided their futures and they were helpless in the face of his dreaded coin-toss. The Unchosen were commanded to go forth to the internet, their communities, and their families and friends to make this warning known, and, hopefully, they could save all of humanity from the unflinching domination of The Lord, their God, cancer.

Meanwhile, in a dark government office, a fresh file was pulled from the inbox of a man whose name had long faded into the obscurity of bureaucratic clockwork. But unlike the usual cheap monotony of the letters and documents that he was accustomed to putting through the shredder under his desk, this lone piece of flayed and compressed foliage delivered news of a scientific breakthrough, one that he was immediately terrified of. In response, he frantically rose from his seat, ran to the elevator, and descended 8 floors to put the sheet not into a shredder, but into the basement’s incinerator. Then, after packing up his things for the night, he wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead and exited the building he’d been working in. Above him glowed the logo of The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But upon entering his vehicle, he promptly phoned his other employer, telling him that “it” had happened again, and that he was on his way now. A sigh emanated from the other end, then the word, *goddamnit,* crept up from behind the exasperated exhalation. What followed was an order, *just get here, now, and call Victor, we don’t have much time.* Then the phone went silent.

Back in Ezekiel’s church, Carcinoma’s Pope was gathering a large influx of members from his work online, posting articles, videos, and promoting films that showcased the prevalence, suffering, and death that cancer would bring to those who lived long enough to receive Carcinoma’s Touch, and that the only ways to deal with it were to either accept his judgement, beg for his mercy, or die. These scare tactics were rooted in Ezekiel’s genuine phobia, and were accepted as truth by his ever-metasisizing congregation, accelerated by online viewership, leading to a runaway snowball effect fueled by unrelenting terror. And one day, as if answering a call, a terminally ill woman came to the church, begging to be freed from her cancer. Ezekiel nodded, directed her to a vacant bed, and drew an obsidian knife.

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She was 54 by the time the black shard of rock was plunged into her chest, but it had been over 4 years since her diagnosis. Her treatments were in deadlock with her disease and her immune

system was refusing to cooperate, forcing Alice Dumont to concede and prepare her family for the inevitable. It hurt immeasurably, emotionally more than anything physical, which was unendingly painful. It was as if God was toying with her, like a cat batting a bird about with its paws until it grew bored or hungry, then commenced its mission from the beginning, finishing its quarry off with a swift and merciless strike. Alice braced for the worst. Yet, at the end of her rope, she learned of Ezkiel's church, via his Facebook trawling line, and made her way to the address, when there she dropped to her knees and raised her arms aloft, declaring cancer the one true god, and begged for release from Carcinoma's grip. Ezekiel obliged, and split her heart in half. And as the volcanic glass met the pulsating myocardium, cancer's prophet uttered these words, *Dear Lord, I deliver this woman from your kingdom. I free her from your pain. I give her immunity to your touch. Alice Dumont is no longer yours to torment!* Ezekiel then slid the blade from the cavity it had made, and hung his head down, commanding all present to do the same and speak not an utterance beyond his for a full 60 seconds of unintruded silence.

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Alice's body was wrapped in a white cloth, symbolizing freedom from Carcinoma, and carried to her home, where her husband was greeted by 2 members of the church, in whose unified strength was supported, palanquin-like, the corpse of his wife. The old man was less than happy though, and rather than thank the church, he notified the police instead, and the members were nothing short of shocked.

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The abandoned hospital was raided not long after, for the members arrested at the house were all-too eager to make their message known, as the authorities ought to be aware of the one true god, Lord Carcinoma. Ezekiel was no less surprised at his own detention, pleading with the officers to hear his proclamation, that Alice had asked, begged even, to be freed from cancer's touch, and that death was the only way to accomplish this, as the Lord was all-powerful in life, but in death, one was free. Ignoring this, the officers tore the mask and coverings from Ezekiel's head, and Carcinoma's pope lost his composure, screaming, thrashing, and kicking like a trout ensnared in a gill net, begging the officers to put his mask back on, for the air was deadly to inhale, the sunlight was toxic to the skin, and cancer hung over them all. The officers forced the screaming man into their cruiser, but looked upon one another with perturbation after the door was shut and locked, neither one of them envying the madman's future interrogator.

On the other side of the Mississippi, in Atlanta, Georgia, a lone man sat in a coffee shop, mulling over his ordeal. His name was Victor Koba, and his demurity belied a ruthless drive, a drive that forced his hand, often to places where others would never dare to inch their own. Then, at the strike of midday, he received a phone call, followed by a concise set of instructions. It ended almost as quickly as it had begun, but for Victor, it was all he needed. Rising from his chair, he forked over a wad of cash to the barista and promptly left the shop with purpose, but before he

embarked upon another one of his missions, he took a bus to the local hospital. There was someone with whom he wished to meet.

The nigh-psychotic bellows reverberated off the otherwise soundproofed walls of the interrogation room in a Chicago police station, where within was held Carinoma's prophet, Ezekiel, though none in the precinct referred to him as such, preferring instead to use his government name, thrust unto him at birth, Renley Echis, 30 years old, charged with accessory to murder, no prior arrests. These last words were first uttered by Renley's interrogator, Peter Jobe, who then proceeded to ask the accused, *why are you behaving so…erractically?*. Renely looked at him with daggers in his eyes and outlet a shrill cry that took his captor back, before the former quivered out a demand to have his mask returned to him, immediately, for cancer was his god, and was unmerciful to the "Uncloak'd". Realizing that this may be the only way to extract answers from the self-ordained priest, Peter briefly left the room and returned with Renley's getup, having convinced the officers of its importance to the investigation, placing the mask, rebreather unit, and cloak upon the desk before Renley, who snapped to life and grabbed them from the table, like a starved serpent being offered a rat, subsequently donning his costume faster than Peter could even process what he was seeing. The mask closed onto Renley's face with a vacuous hiss of sealing air, then, after several deep breaths, Carcinoma's Prophet calmed, turned towards his interrogator, and sat down, ready to preach his gospel, in the hopes that all beyond the one-way window would gain an understanding of his message, his good word, and join The Cult of Cancer. He spake, *you see why I must sheath myself in black? Why we all must draw veils about our beings?* Peter cocked his head and sat down across from him, then asked, *why must we?* Renley answered, *because we all live under God's dominion, Carcinoma's kingdom. Cancer is everywhere,* he said, *and we must understand its power and prevalence. Anything you breathe, anything you might wear, bear, or consume could harbor our Lord's touch, then, it will be upon God's will or grace what will become of you.* Peter was perplexed, then asked, *so, cancer is your god?* Renley grimaced, then gladdened in his complexion behind his mask, *he is OUR god. Yours and mine. He is the one god that we can all see, feel, and fear. Some worship Yahweh, others worship Shiva. But I worship a truth. A singular, terrifying, gloriously inglorious truth, that of the one true God. That he is everywhere, in all created things, and within us all. Perhaps not as but a single corrupted cell within a sea of sound samples, but he is there, make no mistake, God is there.* Peter became unsettled, then rebuffed his opponent, though with slightly less confidence as when he entered the room, *so, you facilitated the death of Alice Dumont because you were afraid of cancer?* Renley glowered at him in confusion, *what? No… Alice came to me, having learned the truth of our Lord, and asked the church to end her suffering, to leave Carcinoma's kingdom, and so she did, with no protestation because she had, indeed, learned the great truth. Cancer IS God. The one and only God of this world, as he is the only one who has been proven to affect, then take, life. And there is only one way to escape his Touch. One way to leave his world Unchosen, but you already know what that is.* Peter was surprised, and disturbed, as no one had suggested to him that Alice had gone and died of her own accord. Her widower had insisted that it had been murder,

but… He paused, not flinching his pen. Renely eyed him with anticipation. Peter then adjusted his collar, loosened his tie, and left the room, without saying another word.

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Mr. Dumont refused to believe him. After asking the widower of his late wife's death for the second time in the same day, Peter was met with resentment and anger at his apparent audacity, as to even suggest that Alice had elected to die, said Mr Dumont, was a gross accusation at best, and at worst it was slanderous. The man then slammed the door to his house, leaving Peter bewildered at the intensity of Dumont's reaction, finding it peculiar that he outright refused to even entertain the idea of his wife deciding to end her own life on her own terms, given her condition. Shaking himself from his confuddlement, Peter left the Dumont residence and requested that Alice's sister be tracked down and asked about the victim's mental state following her diagnosis, as it may yet shed light on the true guilt of Renley Echis, who was still held behind bars.

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I mean, if she was gonna die anyway, then what's the problem?, asked Alice's next closest of kin. *She told me that she didn't want to live with this…thing…anymore, so we had a long conversation about her wanting a deliberate death after she found the, what was it?, the church of cancer?, and I said that if this is what she wanted, then she was well within her rights to choose to die, even if someone else killed her. Besides, isn't physistian-assisted suicide a thing?* Peter paused his note-jotting, then responded, *the problem with that, ma'am, is that Renley Echis was NOT a physician. He had no right to kill her.* Alice's sister looked almost offended, *why? Why is what Ezekiel did with a knife any worse than what a doctor would've done with a needle? Huh? What's the difference? My sister was dying! And euthanasia, even with her permission, would cost money, burial would cost money, the hospital room that she was supposed to die in would cost money! Her funds were already running low because of the chemotherapy, which, by the way, was going nowhere! So why is it such a problem for Ezekiel to kill her for free when a hospital would've charged her for it?!* Peter thought until he hit a wall, then responded, *because those are the rules.* Alice's sister turned away from him, *well,* she said cynically, *then maybe the rules are bullshit,* a tear streaming down her cheek. Then she shut the door. Peter stood stunned on the porch upon which their conversation had been taking place, unable to propagate a rebuttal of any significance, even within his own mind. Then, after returning to his cruiser, twiddling his pen, and thinking long and with much effort, he, at last, reached a decision. Putting the car in drive, he made his way back to the station, all the while pleading with himself, in silence, that he was making the right call.

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Renley was escorted back into the interrogation room, and not long after, Peter entered with a written confession, and a deal, that if Renley signed it, he would be pleading guilty, but that as a result, he would be placed in a mental institution, rather than being subject to imprisonment.

Backed into a corner, Carcinoma's prophet agreed, under one additional stipulation, that he be allowed to sign his name as Ezekiel. Peter nodded, handed him the paper, and soon after, Ezekiel was no longer his problem. And into a hospital room the Prophet of Cancer was shut, not to be released until the system had deemed him worthy of freedom.

---Victor---

The soft, repetitive beeps of the heart rate monitor and the slow, mechanical breaths of the ventilator were the only things heard by Victor Koba as he sat by the bed where lay the sleeping form of his beloved wife, Anna, whose disease had haunted him for 3 unrelenting years, and all of the money that he spent to keep her alive never seemed to be enough, as every dime he surrendered seemed to demand another, then another, then another, over and over as the vampire of chemo bled his wallet dry at every possible turn. So desperate was Victor to keep his love tethered to life that he, at length of day, month, then year, cared no longer from where he could extract more currency, no matter what he had to do, or who he had to do it for. *Honey,* he said to her, *I know you can't hear me right now, but I'm going to do another job today. You know I tell you every time, and I know it's pointless, but I need to do it anyway,* he paused, then said, *I just need to be here, you know? I need to make sure I tell you before I leave. Just like I used to, remember?* His wife was silent, her chest moving slowly up and down as the respirator never skipped a breath. Victor hung his head down for a moment, let out a soft whimper, then narrowed his focus as he stood up from his chair, cracked his neck, put on his jacket, and left with these words, *see you for dinner, honey. Back in a flash.* His face gradually hardened into a stony expression as he walked out the hospital doors, as if medusa, herself, had shot him a glare. To watch his wife slowly tortured to death by this most malefactorous of mutations, he didn't simply fear cancer, he hated cancer, for the disease had plagued his life for too long, far too long, for him to think of ought else but destroying it, not of the everymen toiling in their skyscrapers, blissfully unaware that their lives constantly hung in the balance, not of the hopeless efforts to alleviate his wife's pain for even just the seconds that she clutched between life and death, and certainly not of the tedious fumblings of every grad student in the country tripping over their own debt and donors to find one goddamn solution to the affliction he loathed, mouse tested, company approved…he started…mouse tested, the wheels began to turn in his mind, grad students, company approved…it hit him…

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Surely The CDC was not the only place to send such crucial results, as was sent to his employer the day he was called to track down the sender. He boarded the public bus without even looking up, as if on autopilot, his mind tearing through its own filing cabinets, searching, searching, searching…Found it. Looking up, he pulled the stop cord strung above his head and got off at the next street corner. Phoning his boss, he told him of his theory, to which the man on the other end responded, *that, my friend, is why we pay you so damn much.* The call then ended. Victor wracked his mind for possible locations, arriving at several institutions. This sender was clearly an idealist, for as much could be inferred from the nigh-blind optimism of sending such a formula for such a crucial thing to a place like The CDC, showing something of a naive trust of the system. Someone who could easily be traced. But from where? Victor headed upon the first place to enter his wheelhouse, the most obvious choice, and likely, the mysterious sender's first. Quickly booking a train, Victor boarded another bus on its way to Amrak, from

whence he would snake his way north to Boston, Massachusetts, where towered the most prestigious schools in the entire country.

Far to the west of Victor's destination, his unknown target walked from her boyfriend's house to her own tiny San Francisco apartment. After pushing open the dragging, rough-edged wooden door, she removed her scrubs and name tag, upon which was scrawled in pen "Athena Tang". Checking her mail, she was surprised to find, again, no response to her scientific breakthrough, accomplished no later than a week prior, and whose results of the 4 year study were sent to The CDC, Harvard, Yale, MIT, and even Stanford. Yet, there was complete radio silence from every last one of them. Confused, yet unalarmed, Athena sat down in her living corner, trusting that her letters would be found in time.

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But they had been, and it would cost her everything.

Victor Koba stepped out of the train car and inhaled the CO2-laced air of Boston, Massachusetts, a city whose roads were as turbulent and frustrating as its conflicting skyline, featureless mega skyscrapers buccoccied between old colonial steeples. And yet, they stood strong, their contractors never wavering in their convictions that the columns of concrete and old brick could exist in the same orbit, like an incompatible couple whose dying marriage is built on denial. But Victor's lazer-like focus was like blinders on a horse, as he barely even acknowledged the buildings at all, completely zeroed-in on Harvard University, where his guesses and theories had led him, like a shark tracking blood in the ocean. Entering the medical building, he scanned the lobby, his eyes landing on the receptionist desk. As Victor made his way over, the woman stationed there caught one look at his eyes, and was afraid, for they held within them no touch of mercy. *Where does new mail come in?,* asked Victor. The receptionist nervously, but tactfully, answered, *it comes through me, and I send it to whatever department it's meant for.* Victor narrowed his gaze, then pressed in his proverbial drill a little more, *where are your cancer research offices?* His opponent was unsettled enough, *why do you want to know?* He grew impatient, then drew forth a 100 dollar bill. *I'll pay,* he said, slipping her the paper. Her own eyes recoiled, but maintained a sort of composure. Not wanting to escalate the situation, the receptionist calmly examined her surroundings, then returned her focus to Victor, and finally said, *upstairs, first door on your right,* as she discreetly took the money from the table. Not even slightly flitting his expression, Victor turned and left, climbing the stairs and entering the door, as directed by the receptionist, who, upon his departure, doubled over and embraced her panic, her heart practically punching its way through her sternum in its ill-paced palpitations.

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Within the fluorescent-lit room, Victor was met by a young woman who asked him what he was doing there. To which he, in turn, inquired about what she and her colleagues were researching, adding that he was pointed in this direction by the woman at the desk, downstairs, eyeing the orgy of mice stumbling about one another in a large clear plastic bin that was tucked in the corner of a wooden desk. The woman answered that they were students, then asked to know who their unflattering visitor was. Victor spun a lie, saying that he was an investigator following up on an anonymous tip that some questionable research was transpiring in this laboratory. The student looked around, surprised, but fell for the fib, and introduced herself as Margaret, revealing that they were but a team of 6 who were given the results of a crucial study, results that were so unbelieved by their professor that he'd ordered them to be reproduced, which was what they were, in fact, conducting their lab. Victor's eyebrows lowered discerningly, then he asked if they and their professor were the only ones to see such results, and followed this by requesting the latter's name and location. Margaret replied by stating that their professor was with them in the lab, and said that, yes, the 7 of them were the only ones to receive the data, as the former didn't want the study to leak, in the event that it was a mistake. A shutting from the door behind him drew Victor's attention to the man in charge, who introduced himself as Dr. Harlow, only for Margaret to update her designated superior on their visitor, who quickly demanded to know who sent them the data for their current experiments. Harlow clinically replied with, *sorry, no. You see, we have certain policies that-* he was cut off as Victor pulled a knife from his jacket faster than anyone could react, slashing every researcher to death in as little as a minute. He was fed up with "policy". He needed this done, and he needed it done sooner than non-lethal restraint would allow. Though he was careful to let Harlow live, a knife to the doctor's neck as the students bled out around him, not one of them having had the chance to even scream before Victor lacerated their throats. The assassin looked into Harlow's terrified eyes and whispered his demand once more, *where is that, fucking, letter?* Harlow pointed to his office, just down the hall, and shakily handed Victor the keys. Not clicking so much as another syllable, Victor subsequently cut the professor's jugular and promptly left the room, leaving his victims twitching and dying as the white linoleum floor became red as a rosebud.

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Filing through each and every document he could get his hands on, Victor searched and searched for that letter like a bloodhound after a rabbit. Several minutes of frantic yet controlled desperation slipped past him before he finally pulled the right sheet of paper, even better, it was still folded within the creases of the sender's envelope, an envelope upon which was written a return address. But just then, a different thought crept into Victor's mind. If his own employer had, presumably, received the same letter from the same person, then why would he send an attack dog on a wild goose chase for something that the former could simply tell him outright? After all, if the sender was, indeed, the same, then surely the same address would've been written upon that envelope, just as this one. Victor paused not long though, as his situation demanded urgency, both because of his currently tenuous situation, having only just murdered 7 people in a well-trafficked room, but also due to his having a bedridden wife back in Atlanta, deathly ill with a disease that he could not take his attention away from, not even to ponder something that made no sense at the slightest prod of logic. He, literally, could not afford it.

Pocketing the letter, Victor swiftly and discreetly left the building, walking passed the same receptionist whom he'd paid for silence, now never to speak again, for no witnesses could be afforded either, and money fed to a hungry mouth would only keep it shut for so long, especially after those of its vain kind had been killed so viciously. And in a battle of human vanity and material gain, those respective scales could fall in either direction at the drop of a hat. There was simply no point in risking the extension of a life whose eyes had seen the killer's unmasked face. And so, Victor approached the receptionist, whose head tilted upward as the guilty knife of the upstairs room met her windpipe, cutting her brief scream into gurgle, collapse, and quiet. However, as Victor left the building, the security cameras had captured the entire ordeal, save the one whose collective aftermath was rotting in the lab. But those cameras would never be allowed to show their footage, as money would be as much of a savior for Victor as it was for his wife, for as greatly as it had extended her life, so would it, too, extend her husband's freedom from the law.

Caleb Herzog, a name that none in his line of work recognized as anything other than a label to call him by, a name that meant nothing to the man himself, who had never thought of changing it whatsoever, thereby making his given name the perfect one for the empty banality that wafted about his character, like the most passively putrid eminence one could discharge. As he sat in the lambskin leather seats of a chartered private jet, the phone in his jacket pocket vibrated at the ends of his husky fingers, when then they swiftly wrapped themselves around the whining device. Answering it, he was unsurprised to find his employee's voice on the other end, *hiccup, I killed, I think, 6 or 7 "extras".* Caleb nodded, *alright, I'll call fumigators, report a cockroach infestation, no one cares about bugs, so we'll be good. Did you get caught on CCTV again?* Victor responded, *not sure, but it'd be best if that was covered.* Caleb nodded once more, *ok, I'll get the names of the operators working that day, pay them off, and get the place cleaned up. You, my friend, just focus on doing your job.* Victor affirmed this, but added, *one more thing, I found a location and a copy of the letter. Don't worry, I didn't look at its contents, as you instructed. But I don't think that the one who sent it would only send it here. And I have no way of knowing, for sure, what other institutions have received it.* Caleb replied, *hmm, that complicates things. But, it's nothing that we haven't done before. Thank you for telling me. You're a good worker. Your pay will be in your bank account after you eliminate the sender.* Victor responded like an obedient android, *yes, boss. Thank you for the opportunity.* Caleb then hung up the phone and got to work on his end. First, he did as was most urgently needed for his purposes, and traced the names of the security guards on duty the day of Victor's attack, and bribed them via anonymous employees with $25,000 each, so long as they erased the security footage in Harvard's medical building, no questions asked. They all relented to the fiscal demands of their lives, being not fed much by the jobs that they had been pressed to take in their youth of dwindled options for monetary stability, and took the bribes without much question, and one by one, the incriminating footage was scrubbed, without so much as a whisper to the lawful authorities. Then, the victims' families were taken care of with official condolences, funerals, explanations of a terrible, terrible lab accident with sodium gas, vows to improve safety in the future, and, of course, financial compensation, as what were 7 payments of a few

thousand dollars to the nigh-bottomless pockets of someone with billions? Then, the white collared puppeteer turned his attention towards the unknown recipients of the fateful data.

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His phone was the only thing that he looked at for the next 10 hours or so, personally calling the presidents of multiple universities and introducing himself with a set of, admittedly, legitimate credentials, *hello,* he would say each time, as if reading from a script, *my name is Caleb Herzog, and I'm with Eli Lilly, no doubt you've heard of it. I'm calling your institution because we believe that you could be the recipient of a substantial grant. $3,000,000,000 to be precise. However, to qualify for it, you must produce every last piece of research, new and old, related to cancer, and be the first to give it to Eli Lilly. The university with the first and best results will be the one to receive the grant, and, if I may add, exclusive credit for the findings. That is, of course, the most prestigious honor one could carry. Do with that what you will.* Once agreed on, the phone calls would end. After proposing the grant to all ivy leagues and those colleges with the highest reputations, Caleb then sat back and simply awaited the drawing up of his expansive industrial net.

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One by one, the presidents of these universities did exactly what Caleb was counting on. Refusing to tell any other institutions about the grant, so as to be the sole recipients, they all systematically began to strip their scientists, students, and researchers of every last scrap of intelligence that they could find, justifying these moves by saying that their budgets were being cut, and also that they needed to adapt to "new regulations" that had been imposed by the state. In addition, they forced those formerly engaged with these departments to sign a litany of NDAs under the threat of expulsion or employment termination, should they refuse or simply neglect to swipe their pens onto the legally-binding paper. However, when inquired about the reasons for such secrecy, the most common response was something along the lines of, *well, we must comply with these new regulations. And that also means reviewing any sort of work that may come to be seen as, mmm, problematic or outdated. And we want to be on the cutting edge, don't we?* To the nods of the students and faculty present at each of these councils. *We do not perform unprofessional, unguided, or reckless research, not without strict oversight. We must be responsible, even if it brings us a bump in the road or 2. Our prestige is what matters, as how can we expect to be respected if we are not complying with the regulations given by those who hold more authority than we do?* Binding themselves to law, custom, and opinion, every single individual submitted and surrendered their work to their respective presidents, who then, in turn, handed all of the data over to Eli Lilly, whose representative, Caleb Herzog, subsequently got back to each one with the words, *great, great, good. Excellent work you guys. I will take the time needed to review all of the data, and it could be a while before we come to a final decision.* When asked how long, exactly, that would be, the bureaucratic drudge replied, *oh, it could be at least 5 years, as there is a lot of paperwork, you understand. Oh, and be sure not to proceed with any research of this kind until the government gives you the green light,* having been the one to originally deploy this reasoning over the preceding slew of phone calls to each of the

schools. *And as a matter of the grant, we will contact the winner only. If you do not receive any communication after that 5 year period, then you, likely, have not been chosen for it. That is all. Good luck.* And with that, all loose ends were knotted into a constricting bow. All, that was, save 1.

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Now, that was done, all Caleb had to do at this point was, again, wait. All the while, cancer research had, effectively, been frozen in stasis for the next half-decade. And when that time-bracket had closed, Caleb would simply pluck his favorite school from the gallery, and hand it the money. Meanwhile, his clandestine killer was on his way to San Francisco to cauterize that last end of string.

---Athena---

She couldn't believe what she was reading. An e-mail from MIT, formally stating-

We regret to inform you that we must halt our cancer research until further notice. Your data has yet to be reviewed. You may appeal to have it returned to you by contacting us via e-mail or by visiting our website at www.MIT.edu. Thank you for your cooperation and understanding.

Athena shut her laptop with a small amount of force, as frustration was now beginning to upwell within her. Getting up from her desk, she slipped on her raincoat and made her way out of her apartment to speak with her colleagues at her lab in the city.

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As she entered the rented room however, she found that all of her fellow scientists were packing up their equipment and locking doors on all sides. *What's going on?,* asked Athena. Timothy, a 25 year old graduate from Michigan, told her the news, *didn't you hear? They've pulled our funding, something about new regulations being placed on cancer research. We've all been told to sign NDAs. They say because of not wanting to appear behind the times, or something.* Athena simply stared, unable to come up with anything to say. *Anyway,* continued Timothy, *you should've gotten an e-mail with the NDA attached. Did you?* Athena shook her head slowly. Timothy then said, *well, you should have. If you didn't, well, I can't imagine why.* And with that, he and the entire rest of the team picked up their boxes of tools and tech, and left the room, passing the keys off to Athena, telling her to lock up when she vacated. The lights switched off, darkening the place that Athena had spent nearly her entire 20s dedicating her life to. Now 33, she began to wonder, after everything had dimmed, and the tired-wheels had slung their rubber bellies downward, if it had all been worthwhile.

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Hours had passed before the last of the tubes and needles had been boxed up. But as Athena walked away from the entrance of the lab to recover the lingering container of live test mice, she heard a discreet opening of the door behind her, followed there by the slight fluttering sound of a metallic cord being unfurled from the pocket of a leather jacket. It was nearly unnoticeable, but the silence of the room made it squeal like a steam train forced to brake. Athena's eyes widened before she felt a sudden rush of panic, turned, brought the box that she was carrying upward, spun around with all of the force that she could muster, and threw the clutch of sharp objects and clawed rodents into the intruder's face, just before he could ensnare his target's throat with the shiny steel garotte wire that he held in his hands. Then, Athena sidestepped the attacker, skirted around him, and bolted out the door that he'd left open. Casting the box aside, unintentionally letting the lab mice free, Victor Koba quickly pivoted towards the exit and followed his quarry, the one he'd spent the last 2 weeks tracking down. He refused to let her

escape. Not while he had so much at stake, as what better fuel is there than nothing to lose but the love of your life.

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Her soles burned as her lungs grew heavy with each and every breath. The footsteps behind her motivated her to continue though, even unto her collapse, as that was the only thing that she could afford to stop for. She had to keep going, keep running, do not stop, do not think, do not waiver even for a moment. Just keep running. And stop she didn't, until she skidded around the metal fencepost that jutted out from her apartment door, grabbed the railing, and swung around it like a pendulum, her feet dancing on the pavement below, landing herself on her doorknob around which she wrapped her slender fingers as she flexed her wrist, pulling the door open just before Victor rounded the corner outside. Slamming the door shut and twisting the lock closed, Athena then rapidly leaped to her bed and gathered a bag of supplies, but as she bent down to do so, she noticed that her phone was missing from her jeans pocket, for she'd left it back at the lab in her desperation to fly. She had no choice now, she had to go it alone. As she collected the items that she would need, the door behind her emitted sounds of banging, frustration, and anger that progressively heightened after every failed breakthrough. *This guy won't give up will he?,* Athena thought to herself, *he's not going to stop. He's here for some bigger reason, something fuels him, something outside of himself. He's here to kill me, but he also seems to know who I am, that much I can reasonably be sure of. But why does he want to kill me? Why? Why?,* she sighed, *it doesn't matter, does it? It doesn't matter what I think, what I do, or what I want. I need to get out of this city, out of this state, and I cannot tell anyone where I'm going. I can feel it, no one will be safe if I bring them into this openly.* Just then, the door was kicked open. Athena, in full, but managed, panic, sprinted over to her kitchen, pulled a knife from its block, and slammed its point directly into Victor's shoulder as he followed her to the counter. She then proceeded to kick him violently and escape for a second time, running out the door, just barely slipping his grip once again. Victor painfully pulled the knife from his muscle and ripped the pages from a nearby textbook to staunch the bloodflow, shoving the paper into the wound with his fingertips as he clenched his jacket collar in his teeth, doubled-over agony. Then, wrapping himself with his target's pillowcase, he then short-circuited the outlet by the bed in the same way he'd dressed his wound, by packing yet more paper into the outlet and flicking on the lights, causing an electrical fire in the apartment that completely engulfed the room in just a few minutes, the sparks catching the blanket on the bed and travelling about, the place rapidly taking the flames with the enthusiasm of dry kindling and sweeping over their igniter's spilled blood, erasing all evidence of his malicious presence.

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Making her way south from the neighborhood of Richmond, Athena first ducked into a coffee shop with witnesses to evade Victor, if only for a few minutes to catch her breath, her attacker following close behind. Though she was tempted to figure out a way to contact the police or tell someone, anyone, she ultimately decided against it. She did not want any unarmed people to be caught in the crossfire that would inevitably ensue if the authorities were to get involved,

bullets meeting flesh. As she believed this very strongly, more weapons created more problems. Anthropocentric to the very margins of her patience. However, wishing to lose her pursuer at the last, Athena created a sudden scene of turbulence by ordering a coffee, only to throw it into the face of the cashier, cursing her for as many snobbish reasons as she could come up with. With the clientele all distracted and suddenly mobbing her, their phones raised and filming, Athena then slyly led them out of the the shop, the barking hounds inadvertently shielding her from Victor, who was forced follow at a discreet enough distance not be noticed, but never allowing his focus to drift to one side or another, his eyes locked onto his target. Betting on the premise that he would not risk his secrecy by attempting to force his way through a crowd that was not aware of him or his intentions, Athena's gambit was more accurate than she had guessed. The last thing that Victor wanted was a confrontation with the authorities, and a dozen dead and injured people would ring the dinner bell for the bullets in blue, and every news reporter in the city, thereby bringing his own task to ruin. He trailed behind, while Athena, without creating more conflict, had outwitted her hunter, who, at this point, held a begrudging respect for one who had outplayed him thrice in a row. Despite this, he wavered not, keeping the pressure on, even as his prey found her way to a bus stop, boarded the southbound, and took off towards the natural history museum at UC Berkeley, an archaic maze within which this proverbial skink could potentially shed her tail.

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Ordinarily, the museum would have been too small and sparsely occupied with treasures for her purposes, but Athena was aware of the presence of a temporary travelling exhibit, displaying a chronological hall of geologic time, complete with many cast fossils, twisting, winding alcoves and small corridors enveloped with dim light that added to the ambiance of the faux environments of this presupposed prehistory. Perfect for immersion, and potential escape, at least long enough for Athena to figure out her next move. Coming upon the building, she pulled the stop cord and disembarked, looking around the area for her pursuer. However, she did not remain there for long, as it would only be a matter of time before Victor had figured out where she'd gone. And so, she wasted no time and made her way to the museum, wherein she paid the entrance fee and crossed into the main hall, within which was perched the mighty skeleton of a Tyrannosaurus Rex. Scanning the branching corridors, her eyes landed on the exhibit that she'd come for, and she quickly ran inside, just as she glanced behind to see Victor slip past the reception desk and stride forth with a sudden yet subtle urgency when he caught sight of his elusive mark. Fast disappearing into the first section of the hall, Athena began to reach around her own mind, casting different ideas left right and center of how, exactly, she could flee the state for her chosen refuge, Seattle, Washington, without being followed there. That city, she figured, was far enough for a safe distance, but close enough to close it. *Ok,* she thought, *I need a subtle place to leave from. Cheap enough to pay for and ride tonight. So much for trains and airports,* as she passed through the Hadean and Archaean Eon halls, upon whose respective displays were mounted shards of the Acasta Gneiss and fragments of stromatolites. *Only one option,* she thought, as the Ediacaran, Cambrian, and Odovician rapidly cascaded by her. But, as she made her way forward, through the Ordovician Extinction section, she craned her neck backward, only to spy Victor, still on her tail. *Shit,* she reacted internally, evolving from

speed-walk to slight jog, traversing the Silurian and Devonian ages. Athena constantly weighed ways of getting to the sole place from where she could flee in a pinch, *Greyhound. Get a bus from San Francisco to Seattle tonight. Got the money, now I just need the ti*--, Victor's forceful hand cut her off at the Devonian-Carboniferous Boundary hall. He threw her against the collection of fossilized placoderms as she embedded her fingernails into his eyes, temporarily blinding him, then subsequently grabbing his wrists and thumbs, twisting them away from herself before kicking him in the shin and bolting for the Permian. There however, just before the Triassic, she felt a sudden pain in her right arm. Looking down, her eyes outpoured horror to the sight of a garotte wire constricting her bicep. Before she could react, Victor tightened the wire and yanked Athena down to the floor, subsequently tearing the weapon from his target's skin and throwing it around her throat. Blood began to drizzle from the foremost edge of the line of wound before Athena brought up her undamaged left arm and grabbed Victor's ear, trying to viciously rip it from his head. It had become a test of will, who had more to lose by giving up? Just then, a lone visitor came across the deathmatch, shouting, *hey!,* forcing Victor to let Athena go and attack the witness before he was exposed, giving the scientist a lifeline, and, with the garotte wire still wrapped around her neck, she ran down the Triassic hall, but, briefly, before the end, she turned and looked behind again to see the visitor's dead body propped up against the darkness of the last corridor, and no sign of the killer. Visibly distraught, but taking the opportunity, Athena unravelled the makeshift noose and tossed it aside before making her way through the Jurassic and Cretaceous Periods. But again, at the end of the last, Victor showed himself, this time barreling through the flimsy plastic display wall, adjacent to where Athena had been creeping, letting all of the mounts fly onto the floor and skid over the marble as he tackled Athena to the ground, and, without his wire, was forced to begin punching her, in an attempt to incapacitate her so as to deliver a killing choke, belting her relentlessly until she came away with a black eye and a chipped tooth. Having come this far however, she was not about to give up now. Reaching to her left, she grabbed a discarded ammonite shell, and gave as good as she got, over and over again until Victor's face was as bloodied as her own. Finally seeming to run out of energy, the assassin wavered, fell to his side, and collapsed. Dropping the coiled cast, Athena stumbled to her feet, dazed for a moment against the wall of the Cenozoic Era, regained what little composure she had left, and limped out of the Chicxulub hall, leaving Victor behind on the ground. When, at last, she passed through the Quaternary section, the end of the exhibit, she was met with an empty food court, closed for years due to budget cuts. No one had heard the commotion in the exhibit and no staff was present, much to Athena's amazement. Then, she looked behind herself one last time, and seeing Victor shuffling around the corner, she rolled her eyes in exasperation. Knowing that her pursuer would be too exhausted to follow her at as brisk a pace as he'd had before, she, again, took the opportunity and vacated the museum grounds, being sure to conceal her wounds as best she could, as she was now scarred in more ways than one, for that single visitor becoming a casualty of her own situation deeply weighed on her, and she refused to let that happen again, knowing, full well, that Victor would, even in his weakened state, attack and kill any officers who tried to detain him, and she did not want any more blood on her hands that was not sourced from anywhere else that was not shared between herself and the man was trying to kill her.

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After catching another public bus from UC Berkeley, Athena then boarded a ferry, bound for the other side of the bay. During the entire ride there, she did not catch a single glint of Victor Koba. Not after she disembarked downtown, nor even after she found the Greyhound bus station, and not even while she bought herself a one way ticket to Seattle, and sat down in her seat after she'd boarded the bus. Staring out the window, a tear streamed from her black eye, as she watched the city that she's come to love fall away from her gaze mile by stinging mile. And not once did Athena Tang ever look ahead. Not even once.

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Victor Koba walked off the ferry over 2 hours after Athena had fled the city, deducing how she would leave the same way that she, herself, had made that decision. But he also understood that someone would undoubtedly discover what had transpired in the museum, and he, too, had to skip town. However, as of yet, he had no idea where his target might have gone. As he had done before though, Victor entered the bus station and quietly bribed the man at the ticket counter to tell him to where a passenger named Athena Tang had travelled, saying that she was his niece and he wanted to make sure that she was ok, as, you see, both of them been attacked by a stranger in a mask and had already gone to the police, but decided that they both needed to leave San Francisco for the time being, then proceeded to give a description, she was a tall, thin, Vietnamese-American, with long brown hair, and was about 30-ish years old.. Seeing dollar signs at the sight of the bill in his hand, the ticketer relented and told Victor that a woman fitting that description had left on the last bus to Seattle, Washington, but added that Victor could book himself a trip for the following day, the first of which left at about 6 in the morning. Satisfied, Victor paid the dues, and the bribe, turned around, and sat down on the metal benches that lined the inside of the station like pews in a church. He exhaled deeply, finally able to rest a while. But just then, his phone rang. It was the hospital that housed his wife. Quickly answering, he soon put his bruised face in his hands as the words of the doctor tumbled from the phone, *6 weeks to live.* Victor felt as though his head were going to explode, or completely crush itself under the gravity of it all. But it didn't, nothing happened. The world around him kept spinning, the silence, the utter, bitter silence was like ash in his mouth as his heart attempted to leap from it. Crumbling, but not to dust, Victor Koba simply sat, eyes in his palm-heels, as his phone met the floor, tears met his shoes, and his patience met its grave. Once he'd found her, he thought, there would be no god to whom she could pray that would ever come between her and absolute oblivion.

The rain drizzled in watery streaks upon the bus window as Athena opened her eyes, not even remembering that she'd fallen asleep. Over 18 hours on the Greyhound bus had brought her, at long last, to the sky-drenched city of Seattle. Getting off the bus, her next move would have to be to find some accommodation, cheap and low-monitored. *A hostel,* she thought. However, before she could even walk in that direction, a tall figure wearing a black hood appeared in her peripheral vision, just to her left. Thrust into shock, Athena, having become fed-up with Victor

Koba's relentless, and at this point, incessant pursuit, turned and faced the figure, only to realize that this wasn't her San Francisco attacker, due to his apparent height and slight build contrasting with Victor's more robust frame. Her hand was stayed, but not relaxed, as she still did not recognize this person. Perhaps it was another man 'come to kill her, or try, at any rate. But the brief mystery unravelled itself as the figure came closer, pulled down the scarf covering his face, and spoke, *Athena? Athena Tang?* Athena inched backward warily, *who are you? What do you want?* Her right arm grasping a set of keys that she'd picked up in a gas station in northern California. The man spoke calmly, yet darkly, remaining a considerable distance from her, *I would ask if you recognize me, but that would be pointless for a couple reasons.* Athena was on a hair-trigger, *and what reasons are those?,* still holding her makeshift weapon. The man pulled his hood down, exposing his face, a visage that was covered in burn scars and missing hair completely. Athena was taken aback. The man then said, *reason number 1,* as he gestured about his damaged complexion, *but the second, you never would have remembered me anyway, I was kind of a loser.* Athena was confused, *sorry, do I know you?,* her fingers relaxing their grip around the keys. *Not anymore, you don't,* responded the man, *but you might have. Recall, if you will, graduating class of 2015? I'm Asper Silva. Remember Art 101?* Athena dropped the keys into her pocket, *Asper? Jesus Christ, what happened to you?* Looking up and down at her former schoolmate's injuries, completely blindsided at seeing him for the first time in over 15 years, a metamorphosed human being. Asper rolled his eyes, *I'll tell you later. Right now, I want to know about you. You don't seem to have gotten off lightly either,* he said as he motioned to her healing wounds, inflicted by Victor. *Shit,* muttered Athena, *ok, I'm actually really glad you're here, I could use your help.* Asper raised a charred eyebrow, *alright, alright, I'll buy you dinner, and we can catch up there,* he suggested, pointing at an Indian restaurant nearby. With a sigh of relief, to finally have come across someone that she knew, in a city where she'd anticipated that she'd know no one, Athena readily went with Asper to the restaurant, not prepared for what this single meeting would lead to, within just a fragmented splinter of almighty time.

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So, uh, how have you been?, asked Athena, sitting across a small table from Asper, trying not to touch a nerve in her line of questioning. Asper knew exactly what she wanted to know, though, *you mean, how did I get these scars?,* quoting The Dark Knight as he gestured to his burns. Exhaling a slight laugh of embarrassment, Athena admitted that she was, indeed, curious, but added that if it would be too much… *Nonsense, it's fine. It was going to come up eventually. Might as well nip it in the bud, right?,* Asper countered the reservations. Athena nodded and Asper began his story. *So, it's not a particularly happy story. But it's a good one,* Asper said with a tone that suggested a move above his past. However, there was something, Athena thought, off about the way her former classmate talked about it, like it was a good thing that he got injured so severely. The man continued, *have you heard of this thing that happened like, uhm, 'bout 6 months ago? There was this guy that started a religion around,* he shook a little, his cracked lip curling, *cancer?* Asper was visibly bothered by that word leaving his lips. Athena nodded, saying that she'd heard of something like that happening in Chicago, but that she hadn't heard much. *Well,* Asper continued, *it was called The Cult of Cancer, and they posted a*

bunch of shit online, stuff like "oh, this thing made of this material could give you cancer if you touch it", or "this food has been contaminated with microplastics", or something. And, I'm not gonna lie, it got to me. He paused, *it really got to me. Then, I heard about this condition called "early-onset cancer" that attacks people under 40, and that was it.* Athena was transfixed, *what was it?* She asked. *It was the end. It was all I could tolerate. I couldn't take it anymore, I just, I was done. I was tired of living under this, this…thing…this…monster. So, in 2024, I drove my car into a building. I hoped that it would kill me.* Athena was horrified, but didn't show it. Asper sighed, then continued, *but it didn't. It caught on fire instead. I couldn't escape, so I just, just burned. And I wanted to burn to death, I really, really did. But I didn't, I just didn't. Then, someone came, broke the window, and hauled my ass out. I made it to the hospital, insurance paid, I had my reconstructive surgeries, and from then-on, I lived in constant fear. One day, I found a small dark spot on one of my fingers, it could've been melanoma, or it could've been a freckle. I couldn't tell the difference, so I didn't take the risk, and…*He brought the hand into view from beneath the table. A ragged, asymmetric stump in place of his left ring finger signalled that he'd cut off that entire digit. Athena wore a gaze of disquiettude as her friend lowered his mutilated limb, *I think I was on suicide watch for about a month after that.* Athena couldn't believe what she was hearing. She was expecting a horror story, but nothing like that. She now believed that she understood why he covered his face during the hours when Ra reigned supreme, perhaps even the reason for why he lived in Seattle, the consistent lack of sunlight in a consistently rainy and cloud-covered city, the reason for his being suicidal. He was afraid of cancer. Deathly afraid. So afraid that he would rather slice off his own finger than confirm his anxiety's object at some clinic, that he'd rather die in a car fire than in a sick bed. *That's horrible,* she said sincerely. But Asper cocked his head to the side and smirked as well as he could, *it WAS horrible. But now, I have a solution, a permanent one. Don't worry, it doesn't involve my death, probably.* Athena didn't know what to say to that. *And that, my friend, is where I think you can help me,* Asper advertised. Athena snapped herself out of whatever trance she was in, and responded, *umm, what do you need help with? If there's anything you need…* Asper smiled, *thank you. But first, I want to know about you. How did you get YOUR scars?,* again quoting The Dark Knight. Athena shook her head a little and recalled the events that had led her to him, much to Asper's mounting excitement, though, like Athena, he showed himself not. However, he did ask her of what she'd done differently than all of the other scientists who pursued the same thing? As thousands, even perhaps millions, of researchers were coming up with ideas left and right, so why was she the only one of them to have a hitman after her? Athena hesitated, but eventually let slip her secret, as who else did she have, at this point, to confide in? *I think, it might be that my team and I had,* she paused, unsure of whether or not to unveil it, but decided that her old friend needed the comfort, and so revealed, *alright, we created a cure for cancer. And not just for one variety, but for all of them.* Asper was considerably surprised. Then he asked how she'd done it. Athena outlayed her work, *well, alright, I may as well tell you at this point. Ok, so, we figured that cancer is so powerful because the immune system can't kill it, yeah? So, I thought, well, why don't we come up with something that can. Something that can act as a sort of secret police for the body that fills in the gaps that ordinary immune cells are unable to. Then, someone came up with the cell-killers known as HIV viruses, but suggested that we modify its RNA to target cancerous cells rather than their usual prey. So, the first thing that we did was catalogue all of the mutations that caused cancer in rodents,* Asper lowered his

eyebrows as this last thing was said, glossed over, as if it wasn't absurd. Athena kept elaborating, *so, we took DNA from these mice and found that all the mutations were similarly causing unchecked cell division, so we figured that they must overlap somewhere. At some point, the same switch had to be flipped to cause the same, basic, effect, a cell that divides indefinitely. Then we thought, what if these mutations could be used for another purpose, to target and kill the very cells that expressed them? After all, that's what HIV does, targets immune cells based on their DNA signatures, right? So, what if we could get that virus to do the same thing to another set of targets? We spent 3 years logging all of the mutations we could, then we got a sample of HIV, and genetically modified it, using CRISPR-Cas9 to, essentially, switch the types of cells that our strain targets, from immune cells, to those that held the mutations that we logged earlier. And, lo and behold, the virus was insatiable, killing every last cancer cell in our mouse models.* Asper no longer seemed impressed. *And you know the best part?,* Athena's enthusiasm was growing, almost forgetting about her deadly tail, back in San Francisco, completely enamored with her research and the topic of discussing it after keeping it hidden for so long. Asper narrowed his eyes, *what?,* he inquired sharply. Athena ignored his falling patience, *it's permanent! HIV remains within a person's body, usually causing AIDS, but now, with our strain, it is, effectively, cancer immunity!!* Asper sighed, but, all at once, began to feign curiosity, *interesting, so, where is it?,* he asked with a glimmer in his eye. Athena sighed, *that's when our funding got pulled, then that asshole tried to kill me. And, well, here we are.* Asper thought for a moment, then proposed something else, *ok, so, can you make it again?* Athena scowled, *no, I can't. Because I no longer have the budget, the facilities, the backing, the resources, or the test subjects.* Asper responded, *what do you mean "backing"?* Athena looked slightly confused, *the government backing. You know, I got permission from the state to do my research. You know that's necessary, right?* Asper looked angry now, *no. I'm afraid I don't. Seems to me that the state failed you. Ripped away your resources and your "backing",* saying this word with air quotes gestured with his fingers, *just when it suited them.* Athena was becoming frustrated, *ok, so, how would you pull it off without "backing"?* Asper smiled, *how about I show you.* Athena pulled her head backward in shock, now very interested. *Just don't tell anyone about it, ok?,* Asper requested, *I don't want what happened to you to happen to me or my own research. Got it?* Athena nodded, but inside, she banked the phrase "his own research" into her memory, for if there was, in fact, another way to cure cancer, then she would be more than happy to involve herself, though, she still attempted to process the fact that a man she knew just so happened to be researching cancer at the very time as she. Just then, their food arrived, but neither one of them ate a single bite of it, too busy discussing, in hushed whispers, where and with what resources Asper Silva was working on his own version of the cure for cancer.

Far away, near the city of Indianapolis, there sat a tall man in an armchair, enthroned beneath a vaulted ceiling. Beside him was a fireplace, into which he casually tossed stack after stack of paper. And inked upon these sheets had been recorded the results of nigh-countless scientific experiments, brought in from across the country by his most effective protege, Caleb Herzog, whose station within their company was steadily rising. That worker had dedicated his entire life

to serving Eli Lilly, the mult-asset conglomerate around which he'd chained his own throat, a leash for a good dog held by a better man, one to whom all deferred, as he was their arbiter, their sage, their god, and most importantly, their boss. Round after round of white papers were thrown into the fire to the sensation of sparkling water passing over the lips of one who had ordered the silencing of countless others, the one whose massive mahogany desk at the pinnacle of the Indianapolis skyline was emblazoned with the name Tom Hobbes, the most elegant example of humanity, he thought to himself, in a world that belonged to their kind.

The sliding door to an old subway car ground its way open with an intense metallic scraping that made Athena wince. However, Asper had grown accustomed to its ring, especially unaffected by it now that his ears were functioning less than seamlessly, given the burns that they'd suffered in that car that was never far from its victim's memory. *This is your lab?,* inquired Athena as she observed the likely tetanus-riddled shell of a former train. *Sort of,* responded Asper, *it's more like an office. My lab is somewhere else, nearby, but more hidden. And I don't feel that I should show it to you until you actually agree to join me. And to do that, well, you should probably know the goal. You know, the endgame.* Athena then asked about this, to which Asper answered that he hated how expensive things like chemotherapy were, and the ineffectiveness, exclusivity of candidacy, and high costs associated with alternative treatments, such as immunotherapy, whose research, he said, was proceeding at a crawl. *So*, he said, *I've devised a strategy wherein everyone, not just those at the top of this fucked up caste system, will benefit. But, it's not exactly legal.* Athena raised an eyebrow, *ok, how is this not legal?* She asked, now slightly apprehensive. *My question exactly,* responded Asper, cranking open the door the rest of the way, *but, I need you to see this. Don't worry, it's better than anything that society can concoct with its "backing". In this place, we can be free from restrictions, and actually accomplish what we need to. We can actually save lives. We can save all of them. All you need to do is cooperate with me, the same way that you cooperated with the system. The only difference is that I'm not a selfish person, and I don't give a rat's ass about money. This goes bigger than money and bigger than just the 2 of us.* Athena was skeptical, but, seeing no alternative at this point, said, *ok. But, if I do this, you need to answer one question for me.* Asper was pleased, no longer as antagonistic as he'd been before, *of course! What do you want to know?* Athena then introduced her inquiry, *why are you really doing this? I mean, the thing that you seem to be forgetting is that people often survive cancer with the right treatment that exists. So, even if you're right, there has to be some other reason why you are so willing to go so far.*

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Asper thought for a moment, then responded…

---Middlogue-The Declaration of Asper Silva---

Age, age. I mulled it over, again and again, age, age, how many more would I pass through before I, too, was rendered impotent and infirm by the relentless crushing force of almighty time? Life is like a casino, for if you stay for too long, then you will eventually lose. Nearly all chronic health problems, I noticed, begin at age 40. Then, I remembered the records of humans living in pre-industrial eras, ie, most of human history, seldom reaching a more ancient milestone than a grand total of 4 decades.

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I remember an experiment, done on a variety of species. The conclusion of which being that they all had a "genetic age cap", an expiration date, if you will. For humans, it was approximately 37-40 years of age. It clicked. For aeons of anthropoid history, this was the most common age at which to die, not because life was harder, but because it was just not forced to exceed its natural end. But after World War II, with the advent of modern medicine and technology, humans had practically double this number. Therefore, the only reason that people live to an average age of around 75 in the 2020s, for example, is advancements in medical technology.

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The problem, however, is that humanity pushes its individuals far beyond the ends of their genetic lives, thus creating circumstances with which their immune systems, and other factors, are not evolved to cope, leading to chronic illnesses, cancers, and increasingly feeble minds and bodies, unable to sustain themselves for such a length of time, like pushing an aging, rusty old car past the point of its due date until it simply gives out and dies, physically unable to go on, all the while, increasing amounts of time and resources are spent on increasing frequencies of repairs and maintenance until duct tape is all that you have left to hold together a machine that is simply not meant to exist for as long as it has been forced to.

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Your lymphatic system only produces a limited number of t-cells, mostly in your early teens, after which the thymus gland that creates them is gradually replaced by fat tissue, thus unable to carry on its work. Theoretically, these natural killer cells are enough for one to remain reasonably healthy for their entire life. However, this system is only adapted to manufacture enough t-cells to fit your genetically natural lifespan, meaning that the longer you live, the more t-cells die off, the less effective, over time, your immune system becomes, starting at age 40, or so. It simply cannot keep pace with this artificially, and rather suddenly, extended lifespan that humanity has bequeathed unto its billions of avatars.

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Cancer screenings begin after 40. Health problems become more frequent after 40. Cancer rates dramatically rise from around 3.5% to almost 10% after age 40. Heart attacks and diabetes become more common after age 40. Joint problems and pains become evermore frequent after age 40. The evidence speaks for itself, it truly is all downhill from there.

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I will not be one to roll down that hill. I will end my own story at its peak. At my apex. Quit while I'm ahead, while I can still see the stars, while I can stand at the top of my tower of silence, and die on my own terms.

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If death is inevitable, then suicide is taking control of the inevitable. It is the ultimate act of defiance, denying the system its withered pound of flesh.

---Asper---

Athena was shocked, but she did, on some level, understand Asper's dark, vicious logic. *So, you want to do this big thing, then kill yourself before you grow old?,* she asked with a quiver of her lip. Asper responded with the coldest and most efficient blade he could draw, *yes,* he said. *Yes.* However, that was not all that he wished to accomplish, as he cared for one thing in the world besides himself, and that one thing, was everything, all of those living things that existed outside of what he called "the human regime", all that lived in its despite, and in defiance of its fabricated, fucked-up caste system.

Meanwhile, in an Illinois mental hospital, the tormented man formerly known as Renley Echis was painting an effigy using his narrow, knobby fingers. The picture was that of a tall, gaunt humanoid figure with its hands and feet hewn from its body, oxygen tubes up its nose, IV needles embedded into the insides of its left elbow and through the thin skin on top of its right hand, and its eyes, mouth, and ears sewn shut. It was outgrown with strands of thin hair that trailed from its emaciated head. The art was clear, indeed, at least to the artist, who crouched like a gremlin as he painted, shaking with every stroke, constantly imagining an IV needle stuck into his own trembling right hand. But as the last of the paint met the paper, the door to Ezekiel's room was opened, and in stepped a tall man, dressed in a dark green polo shirt, khaki pants, dress shoes, and sporting a pair of thick-rimmed glasses. His large head was balding with long, white hair coming off the sides, and a short mustache and thin beard obscuring his lips. He looked like an eccentric professor, but spoke like a businessman, a rich priest with an agenda of his own. *Hello,* he said, *my name is Tom Hobbes. I am very interested to know what you are drawing there.* He pointed to the strange effigy that had only just been completed. Ezekiel looked up at him sheepishly, then smiled, another had come to learn the great truth, he thought. *It is a depiction of he who rules the world, it is God,* declared the prophet. Hobbes wore an expression of analysis, before pivoting the subject on a heel-face turn to another direction, but related enough to what had come before for the mental patient not to ask why the focus of conversation must change, *Ezekiel, my friend,* began Hobbes, *do you care about people?* Ezekiel responded, *I care about what binds us, what ails us, and what kills us. I care about God.* Hobbes then said, *then, why kill a person, yourself?* Ezekiel was antagonized, *she asked me to, she begged me. Why would I deny someone's freedom to die? The people under God have every right to their own choices, even if they choose to escape our Lord's kingdom, even if they choose to die. And the only way out IS to die.* Hobbes smiled, *what if that wasn't true?,* he proposed. Ezekiel, though, would hear none of it, *but it is! There is no escape except death! Cancer rules all of us! It is life, it is death, and it is God!!* Hobbes was unfazed, *but there IS a solution, my friend. A cure.* Ezekeil refused to believe this, *no! There can't be!* Hobbes still pressed on, undaunted, *but there IS Ezekiel. And it, my friend, is the only one.* Hobbes, of course, had no idea if this was true though, only referring to the existing, and expensive, treatments that had been archived within his own memory, though he obviously did not reveal this to Ezekiel, content with the idea of a "single cure" that would get the emotionally crippled

man off the ground, believing that Athena's cheaper, more effective cure had been destroyed and not knowing of that which Asper had been fighting to create. And this time, Ezekiel could kindle no rebuttal, leaving Hobbes the sole architect of their conversation, *so, if you truly want to help people, tell them that they don't need to die, if they pay their way and contribute to society, for our cure. And together, our church and our labors can create the best possible world for human life.* Ezekiel was not yet satisfied, *why do you think that you matter more than God?* Hobbes lined up the perfect response, *because if we humans can cure cancer, then we, all of us, can be our own gods. We can be in control. We can have the power. And we have the solution. We have the cure for cancer.* Ezekiel then posed another question, *you think that you can beat God?* Hobbes replied, *we are humans. We already have. Just look around you, Ezekiel. Humans feared the wind, rain, and the earth, calling them Zeus, Thor, and Set. But then, houses, satellites, weather patterns, plate tectonics, all of this, all of it, was done by us. No other species has ever tamed the earth before, and no others will beyond us. We are better than animals, my friend. And you can help us all by joining this glorious world we are building. Cancer will be but a myth after we are done, and you can help us put it in its place. We are the gods now. We are in charge. We needn't fear what we can conquer, Ezekiel. But first, we need to conquer fear itself. You can't climb a mountain, after all, if you are scared of the cold and snow.* Ezekiel pondered this, then asked, *are you sure that you have the cure?* Hobbes' response was immediate, *yes,* he stated with absolute conviction. *Yes.* Ezekiel mulled this over, again and again. Then, after a few seconds of looking up at his painting, he turned to Hobbes and took his hand, letting the new man in charge lift him up, not even bothering to bend his own knees.

The rusty train car rocked and creaked with every step that the pair took in the office of Asper Silva, back in Seattle. Athena's mind was still baking in the stew of words that Asper had poured, but the latter held no such reservations about his own convictions. *So,* he began, *have any thoughts?* Athena looked at him as he sat down in a rickety office chair, parked behind a metal desk. *More than a few, but you seem convinced,* she said, unsure of how to even react to it all. Asper figured as much, and told her so, before opening his desk drawer and presenting Athena with a small vial of pinkish-red liquid. *What is that?,* she asked, slightly perturbed. Asper simply answered, *the results of my phobia.* Athena realized then that Asper's fear had become his fuel, a pathological phobia of cancer so oppressive that he waged, upon its object, war. A war that he, evidently, had won. *Do you want to know how I made it?,* asked Asper, knowing full-well what Athena's answer would be, and her response was as predictable as the eventual fate of one who had seen The Elephant's Foot at Chernobyl with their own eyes. *Absolutely,* she said with a nod. Asper placed the vial on the desk and grinned, the scarred edges of his mouth not quite able to stretch as far as all that.

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Further down the tunnel, deep in a regardless alcove, Asper pressed a small key into a caged, fence-like door, from beyond which emanated the antiseptic, ethanol smell of science, and the

malodorous decay of the underworld. Athena was still apprehensive, but undeterred, as she, of all people, wanted to know how Asper had accomplished a similar feat to her own, without the resources bequeathed unto her by by the society that she previously had fallen in line with, but that Asper had wholly rejected on grounds that Athena was still attempting to puzzle-out. Entering a narrow, hidden corridor, Asper rounded a right-angle bend and opened up another cage-door to a wider chamber, occupied by much matter. Equipment for sterilization and surgery were laid out on a long, steel slab, as the ones used in mortuaries. In large bins were heaped piles and piles of needles, belonging to syringes long since used. And finally, upon another table in the room, there was a small journal, within which were Asper's notes, meticulous, but difficult to decipher to anyone but their writer, who flashed Athena the inside of the book, almost as if to say that she could never guess at the true meanings of his riddles and glyphs. Athena then looked over to her right, towards the back of the room, and gasped aloud. Standing in cages meant for dogs were about a dozen humans, all naked, and all filthy, coated in the grimy raiment of The Underground. Asper regarded this reaction, and began to explain that those people were there by choice, all volunteering to help the world and their loved ones, whatever the cost might be to themselves. Humans, he said, were so slavishly devoted to their own self-important image of their species that the idea of letting one-another down in a time of need was one that they reviled even more than a stint in a dingy dog cage beneath the city, if such a stint were to be to their own benefit, and if given no other feasible, financial or otherwise, alternatives to whatever plight they've found themselves within the clutches of. This unsealed the reasons as to why these people never seemed to complain to their captor, knowing that he would be their only avenue for salvation, their only way to stay alive, if only for just a little while longer, clinging to the reality that they knew like a security blanket, terrified of the unsentimental void beyond its knitted confines. *How, then, were they useful?,* Asper asked rhetorically, answering his own question with, *you see, Athena, I asked myself, after my little car crash, why was it that some people get cancer and not others? The answer was that any cancerous cells were usually killed off before they could cause any damage. So why did this not happen in some people? I arrived at the conclusion that the afflicted's t-cells simply missed the mark where the healthy's did not. To patch that hole,* Asper continued, *I figured a transplant from a younger, healthier person, whose genetic profile and blood type were a match, like an organ transplant for other ailments, might do the trick. And if not, well, I also came up with another option, to infect cancer cells, which the subject's t-cells did not recognize, with pathogens that they did successfully target and destroy, effectively bypassing cancer's best defense mechanisms by marking the diseased cells for death with an alien infection. Put simply, if the immune system targeted and killed the pathogens, then it would take the infected cancer cells with them. This, in tandem with the t-cell transplants from the healthy donors, completely negated cancer's armor, allowing the immune system to do its job.* Athena was impressed, but disgusted with Asper's treatment of the patients, whose cages were crudely labelled as either "sick", "cured", or "donor". Asper went on, *so, what I did was extract t-cells from the healthy ones,* gesturing toward the cage labelled as such, *using a simple syringe placed behind the upper-sternum and in front of the lungs, where the thymus sits comfortably in the cradle of other vital tissue, whose units to protect it are trained and modified by the one held in their midst, making the thymus the bone marrow for natural killer cells.* He walked over to the "sick" cages, continuing further, *once done, the t-cell slurry then is injected into the suitable subject, and,* he demonstrated the technique, jabbing one of the

people in the cells with a filled syringe that he'd pulled from his pocket, *taa-daa! It's gone, just within a few days,* corroborating this by motioning to his "cured" cage and prodding one of its occupants with a large wooden stick. The woman nodded at the impact of the sharp point, and hoarsely replied that her cancer was, indeed, gone, and had been for almost 3 months. Asper withdrew the stick and turned to Athena with a rough smile across his face. Athena stepped back a little, then said, *ok, I'm impressed, I admit it. But, if she's cured, then why don't you let her out of that cage?* Asper's smile quickly faded, then he retorted with a question of his own, *once you cure your mice, do you let them out? Do you free THEM?* Athena lowered her eyebrows. *What has that got to do with this?,* she asked angrily. Asper was just as annoyed, e*verything,* he bit his words harshly, *it has everything to do with this. These people remain here because I will eventually need them to help, shall I say, drive the point home.* Athena was becoming increasingly frustrated with her former classmate, *what point?* Asper creased his hairless brow, *the only point here. I maintain, and hear me out, the questioning of a controversial and never addressed notion, why is Hitler considered a bad person?* Athena was gobsmacked, *what? Because he killed people.* Asper then began, *did you know that Zyklon B, the cyanide gas that the Nazis used to kill 6,000,000 humans, was initially manufactured for the killing of insects? Humanity thought that it was perfectly acceptable to use this cloud of death against those with exoskeletons and 6 legs, but then when some racist psychopath decided to use it on other humans, then, suddenly, it wasn't ok. That is just one example of a complete and utter, fucking, double standard that humans inflict on every living thing in the world. Experimenting on living things is ok, unless it's on humans. Stomping a wasp to death is fine, but doing the same to a human is considered murder. Humanity is built on double-standards, to the ruin of all life on earth, including humanity, itself. Think about it, it took you over, what? 4 years to create your cancer cure by experimenting on mice, but as soon as I shed humanity and saw things for what they really were, and not for what other people said that they were, I broke eggs to make an omelet and created my cure in just 3 months. Your anthropocentric double-standards are actively doing your own species harm. It cripples and hampers research when that research could save lives faster, simply by eliminating anthropocentric regulations and stagnating bureaucracy from the substantial list of artificial hurdles and road blocks imposed by a system that loves nothing more than to exalt and masturbate its own inflated self image and sun-sized collective ego. There's not even any logic to it. You're experimenting on the wrong animals. If you want to cure cancer in humans, then you need to experiment on humans! It's said that you share over 90% of your DNA with mice, so what? Do you know what other thing you share over 90% of your DNA with? Bananas! Bananas, for fuck's sake! Should we start experimenting on THEM too?! "Human rights",* he continued, *are simply the brutal imposition of anthropocentrism upon the world, putting humans on a pedestal that they created for themselves and do not deserve to be on, constructing it on the graves of other living things. It's ok to do whatever you want, as long as it's not against us!!! Well, guess what!!? You are NOT the most important things in the world!!!! You mother-fucking pieces of fetid shit!!!.* Asper paused to catch his breath after his tirade, propping himself up with his hand against the wall. The people in the cages reacted not, clearly used to this sort of thing from their caretaker, who then concluded his speech with, *my cure will be used as incentive for change. If the human world bends, then the cure will be made available, to all citizens of the world, free of charge.* Athena, surprised at this seemingly abrupt moral swing, then asked, *and if the world doesn't*

bend. Asper looked at her with an incandescent fury, *then it will break over its own spine. If humanity does not accede to my demands, then the cure, and I, will burn on the fires of your pride.* Athena just stood there, blinking, not understanding any of it. Asper saw this, not to his shock. He wasn't trying to convince her, he just wanted her to know. Just answering her question. Athena took a moment, a breath, then a break, telling Asper that she would have to leave to think about it, outside. She needed some air, she said. Asper said nothing, simply waiving her away with his free hand and retiring to another armchair in the lab, his forehead resting in his open fingers, all 4 of them cradling his skull. Athena swiftly turned and walked out of the room and into the main tunnel, where she saw the abandoned train car, and remembered that Asper had left a sample of the cure sitting on his desk. Though she considered stealing it, she decided not to do anything potentially rash before thoroughly sorting out her situation first. And so, she left The Underground and paced a while on the slick street above, where none around her were any the wiser to the proverbial earthquake unfolding just beneath their feet.

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Sitting down at one of the tables in the Indian restaurant in which she re-met with Asper, Athena mulled over his words, about humanity and the ethics of medicine, again and again. Was there merit to any of it? She asked herself. She attempted, countless times in just a few moments, to find some sort of circumvention of Asper's declarations and, in her mind, twisted logic. But, through all of her mental efforts, could find none. None of what he had said in The Underground was categorically untrue, she realized. She wrestled with herself in silence, *I don't know,* she muttered with a sigh. But just then, a hand made rough contact with her shoulder. Looking up, Athena's face grew pale as a carcass when she saw the bloodshot eyes of Victor Koba. However, against all of Athena's fears, the assassin promptly released his grip, lowered his head, and sat down across from her at the same table. Athena didn't move, too shocked to even flinch or reach for her keys that were still in her pocket, purchased for this precise situation. But this time, she found herself unable to follow through with anything, still in a state of psychological purgatory from her experiences in The Underground. Furthermore, she sensed that Victor, even after all he'd put her through in San Francisco, now meant her no harm, but why, she still knew not. That was until he began to speak, candidly, and with a hint of melancholy behind every single word, *you are a hard woman to kill. I do give you that credit, doctor.* Athena dragged herself back to some semblance of sense, *I'm not a doctor,* she replied. Victor smiled, delivering a slight laugh before speaking again, *of course you're not. You're better. You're a thinker,* Victor paused, then continued, *your research is all destroyed, by the way,* he admitted with a shift in tone that suggested mild regret. But this was not enough to sway his former target. Athena shot back, *if you admire me so much, then why did you destroy my work and try to kill me?* Victor took a breath, and shed a few tears, *because…god…my wife is dying.* Athena glared at him, at first, but as Victor explained his situation, her expression softened as she began to realize that he was serious. Victor began, saying, *brain cancer. She didn't even smoke. I worked for Eli Lilly, based in Indianapolis. They put me in contact with some guy named Caleb Herzog when they saw my background, ex delta force, so they made me an offer. Do these jobs for us, with discretion, and we'll pay you enough to keep your wife alive. I had no choice. At least, not much of one. You'd be surprised at how little a veteran makes,*

especially when all of their missions are so classified that they can't even afford to put that on their employment history, otherwise those secrets would be exploited by someone else. He tapped his index finger on the table, *so much for avoiding that.* Athena then asked, *so, if you need these jobs so much, why'd you stop hunting me?* Victor winced as more tears left their ducts, *I wasn't going to. I wanted so badly to kill you, I'll admit it. But then, I realized that it would be pointless.* Athena was suspicious, *why?* Victor then said, *she's terminal. 6 weeks to live. And I can't- I--,* Victor's constitution finally crumbled as he laid his head down on the table, defeated. A tower of deadly strength, reduced to a husk, desperate and hurting, ruthlessly leashed and tortured from afar by forces that he couldn't even see. Athena finally understood, and touched his hand. *Hey,* she said, *I may have something that will help.* Victor looked up, hopeful for the first time in so many years, as Athena began to explain Asper Silva and the cure that he created in The Underground. *I came here to hide from you,* said Athena, *but then I ran into an old schoolmate of mine from when I lived in Yakima, a guy named Asper Silva. When I knew him, like, 15 years ago, he was this really awkward geeky guy that no one really paid much attention to. But now,* she sorted out the words to describe the cognitive dissonance surrounding Asper, *he's like a completely different person. He's dark, cynical, like, really cynical, and so twisted that I can't even begin to explain why he did the things that he did. He asked me to join him in propagating his cancer cure under some weird philosophy about humanity being selfish, or something. He wants to use his cure to make a point by using human guinea pigs, then do some carrot and stick thing as leverage to make the government bend to his demands. I don't know what those demands will be, but I can guess that they will be too much for most people to accept, and they'll reject them. And if that happens, then Asper said that he is going to destroy the cure, and kill himself, just to deny it to them, I guess as a kind of "fuck you" to everybody.* Victor lowered his gaze, then asked, *well, did he do it? Did he cure cancer with his "human guinea pigs"?* And it was only then when Athena realized what Asper's goal truly was, the vitality of it, the visceration, the gravity, the brutal, crushing gravity of the intention of changing minds with a method so diabolically insidious that she, someone who only wished to see the good in people, was almost convinced to join Asper's crusade. And if she could become susceptible to this tactic, then who knows what it could do to someone like Victor, someone so desperate for an ounce of salvation that they would be inclined towards anything that may give them hope, at any possible expense, even at their own. Maybe Asper, indeed, had made a point after all. But then, she did the one thing that not even she, herself, expected, she lied, saying, *no. He didn't. He only wanted to tell people that to "make his point". But it's bullshit. He made his cure using rats, like everybody else.* Victor shook his head, then said, *so he DID do it, but with rats. Gotcha. But why are you telling me this?* Athena then whispered, under earshot of a nearby waiter, *because I can go down there and get you a vial of that cure, so that you can give it to Anna, in Atlanta.* Victor's eyes gleamed, and without a moment's hesitation he said, *deal!* But Athena corrected him, *no, not a deal. A gift. From one human to another.* Victor beamed for the first time that Athena had seen, then said, *thank you, so much*. Athena subsequently elaborated upon the next steps of their procession, saying that Victor should leave the restaurant first, go to The Underground, and wait in the shadows for her to come down there and get the vial from Asper's desk, but she warned Victor not to engage Asper, as the former needed to remain alive to get the cure to his wife, and she sensed that Asper was dangerous and didn't want Victor to come to unnecessary harm while he still needed to save Anna. Then, Athena would falsely

agree to join Asper's crusade, and keep him distracted until Victor could get out of the city and back to Atlanta. The former assassin promptly agreed, not requiring any more convincing, once more thanked Athena, profusely, then left the restaurant, followed a few minutes later by Athena, who, in her haste to accomplish her new goal, failed to notice the subtle cloaked figure sitting in the adjacent booth behind Victor, back-to-back beyond detection, a figure whose eyes now bled with rage, and whose owner silently followed Athena like a dark ghost, whom the woman didn't even hear. And behind her he remained until he slipped away, and went to an armory store about a block from the restaurant.

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Hello, the owner of the store exclaimed with a bright demeanor, pleased and ready to help the new customer in their acquisition of a firearm. Asper approached, and noticed the presence, within in the owner's ears, of small instruments that signalled, perhaps, that the man had gone to the gun range one too many times in his youth, leading to a loss of proper hearing, a loss that the cloaked client understood well, due to his own flame-forged disability, an intimate knowledge that he would use to exploit the very thing from which he suffered only a fraction of, compared to the large man at the helm of the armory, who then asked, *what can I do for you?*. Asper muttered, *uhhgm, you don't happen to have any karambit knives, do you?* The store owner adjusted his right earpiece, then admitted that he didn't know, but suggested that one could be found in the back, as he did, in fact, have a large selection of bladed weaponry, though not in the front, as most clients came here to purchase guns. Asper nodded, and stated quietly, *I think that sounds like a wonderful idea.* The owner then left the counter unattended as he made his way to the back room, sifting loudly through countless metal boxes and steel blades, which resulted in him silencing his very sensitive earpieces, overwhelmed by the constant banging, tinging, and scraping of iron, tin, and titanium. Knowing that his actions would remain unseen and unheard, Asper withdrew, from beneath his cloak, a large stone that he'd gathered from the street, and broke open the prominent frontal display case, stealing a Colt Anaconda .44 magnum revolver, along with 6 compatible bullets. He then swiftly left the store, disappearing just as the owner walked out of the back room with the karambit knife that he'd been so intent on retrieving for his fresh, mysterious customer, a man whom he'd never see again, as Asper Silva intended not to return to this city. Not after what he was about to do.

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Returning to The Underground, the weapon tucked beneath his black cloak, Asper held at bay his anger as he approached Athena in the darkness, who turned to face him upon his hailing call from beyond the wall of her sight. *So,* he asked, *have you had time to…uhh…reconsider my offer?* Athena answered, *I have. And…I accept. What's your plan?* But Asper just hung his head and laughed. Athena grew unsettled, especially after what he said next, *do you really think that I'm THAT stupid? You're an anthropocentrist, to the end.* Then, Athena glanced down at the black cloak billowing in a draft of slight wind, only for the loud cracking thud of a heavy gunshot to reverberate off of the walls of the tunnel. She looked further down at herself to see a dark red liquid materialize from under her shirt, dribble onto her jeans, then meet the floor in rapidly

cascading drips and splashes. A burning sensation began to emanate from the area. Her legs then wobbled, went numb, and she collapsed upon the ground, blood pouring out from a large, messy, circular wound, courtesy a bullet that had drilled through her abdomen, clearly having cut through an artery. Asper lowered the smoking barrel and walked over to her, knelt down, and whispered, *anthropocentric, to your own ruin. You really ARE human.* He cracked a smile and put his finger to his lips before stepping over her body and concealing himself behind the rusty traincar, right on time for Victor Koba to come rushing into the room, in response to the gunshot, finding only Athena, bleeding to death on the gravelly floor. She saw him, choked up some blood, and weakly lifted her up previously garotted right arm as that wound's creator came down to her and attempted to apply pressure to her latest injury. But Athena would have none of it, telling him that she was losing too much blood and to get out of the tunnel, now, and to take "this", spilling the words in a daze brought on by her life draining away, second by weakening second, as she unfurled her trembling fingers, unveiling the vial of t-cells needed by Victor's wife. He took the vial as Athena told him, one last time, *Go! Now! Save Anna!* And with that, Victor ran for the tunnel exit, just in time for Asper to emerge from behind the traincar, look over at Athena, and say nothing as he turned and left his former schoolmate to die, there, upon a smelly gravel floor under a grey city, lying beneath a greyer sky, as the rain continued to downpour on the concrete jungle below. And though that jungle, Asper Silva swiftly and silently followed the beleaguered, grieving, and highly preoccupied ex delta force commando, too stressed and desperate to regard anything other than his dying wife and the vial in his hands, working in tandem, like blinders on a horse, to hide, from his notice, anything but themselves, to Asper's advantage, a slithering tail snaking his way beyond Victor's awareness, even as he followed him from The Underground and through the streets, the rain further masking Asper's movements and the sounds of his footsteps, all the way to the Greyhound bus station, wherein none noticed Asper either, even as he bought a ticket to the same city as his target, Atlanta, Georgia, a place to where Asper knew to follow, from his conversion eavesdrop just a few hours earlier. But his uncharacteristic restraint was far from unintentional, as there was always a method to his apparent madness, deciding to improvise his agenda and follow Victor to whoever was in charge, so that the holder of the leash might be confronted and dealt with personally, for big pharma would undoubtedly find out about his deeds in the tunnels if they discovered Victor using the cure for cancer on Anna. And he wanted to command that discussion. He refused to allow anyone to distort his message with claims of humanity being better than everything else or some bullshit, in regards to "conquering nature with medicine". Even thinking of this notion in passing made him hiss with hate. And before long, he successfully tailed Victor onto the same bus, as the doors closed, the wheels spun, and the steel rhombus strove southeast, none on board suspecting a thing. And Asper hid himself well, like a serpent in the grass, his unblinking eyes locked on his skittering prey, sitting ignorantly, just a single strike away.

---Caleb---

Daddy!, shouted Ellia Herzog at the sight of her father as he pulled his Porsche into a long driveway in an affluent suburb of Indianapolis. Exiting the car, Caleb came into the loving embrace of his 6 year old daughter, one of his many tremendous rewards from the system, to which he had dedicated his entire life, in servitude. Following Ellia into his outstretched arms was his gorgeous wife, Jessica, who kissed him as he crossed the clean-cut lawn, telling him all about the dinner that was being prepared by Caleb Jr., their 13 year old son, who had yet to learn that his talents in the kitchen would be best served at a restaurant of repute, rather than remaining a simple hobby, of which he'd made his considerable culinary skill. Caleb made his way into his large home, whose vaulted ceilings and white hanging curtains gave credence to his high status among humanity, for, of course, the most successful people always had the most money to spend.

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In the white cavernous living room, next to his girlfriend, whose long brown hair shone in the light of the 2-story windows at the front of the mansion, sat Caleb's 26 year old son, Scott, who greeted his father with a sort of relaxation that came off as warm, yet preoccupied, no doubt, with his athletics, as captain of his university team, his studies, making the dean's list at Indiana State every semester, and, of course, his burgeoning modelling career, already booking a deal with Calvin Klein. He was the prodigal son, the model citizen, everything that anyone could ever want in a male human being. Then, in ran Ellia, an intelligent little scholar, getting excellent grades in every single one of her subjects, well on her way to becoming an injection-molded figure of perfection and success. And finally, in the kitchen, as usual, was the middle child, "Little Caleb", as his mother liked to call him, busy crafting his chosen dinner for the family, a stuffed turkey, not even near to Thanksgiving, a holiday that the Herzog's spend every year with their affluent sires in Aspen, Colorado, where the kids' grandparents had a large log cabin that overlooked the glorified mountain hamlet. Once the turkey had been prepared, cooked, and placed upon the table, Caleb Jr. sat down, only for his senior to chime in, politely, as always, muted in tone but upbeat in his manner of speaking, with, *Little Caleb, my aunt has waited for one of your quiches. Why don't you make one for her, and she can send you money for it.* Caleb Jr. looked over at him with exasperation in his eyes, *dad, I told you that I just want my cooking to be cooking.* Caleb Sr. looked down his nose at him, rolling his eyes to his plate, smacking his lips at the delicious slices carved by his youngest son. Scott looked over at his little brother with a similar expression, and said smartly, *y'know little brother, that's called a hobby. You can't make money with a hobby. I would know, I've had a few.* Caleb Jr, sighed, announcing to the whole table, *look, I just wanna make food, ok?* Jessica then spoke up, *and you CAN, Little Caleb. You can. Just, y'know, do what I do. Make some money out of it. Take me for example, I love travelling, I've gone to practically every country in the world. And how did I do that? I turned it into a business. I run a tourism agency. You can't be given a free ride forever, your brother knows that. Look at him, he's strong, handsome, smart, and he's gonna be rich someday, successful. And the ladies will line up for you, too, when you get some miles on your soul like he*

did. I mean, look at his girlfriend, look at her, she is stunning, she gestured to Scott's significant other, who was busy typing on her phone, not looking up. Jessica continued, *Little Caleb, look at me, look at your father. This is what you want, isn't it? Success, success, success!,* she waved her arms all about the room, her golden engagement ring's thumb-sized 20k diamond gleaming in the light of the silverine chandelier, casting a starry essence over the red-maroon tabletop, constructed of solid mahogany. She gestured to all of the family's fanciful possessions, their giant flat screen television, their 4 expensive cars parked outside, their surround-sound home theatre system, and, of course, their lavish kitchen, holding 3 ovens and 2 full-sized refrigerators, *this is what it looks like!* Caleb Jr. followed his mother's arms, but then asked, *why? Does it have to look like…this?* His father looked at him, now annoyed, *son, do you know where we live?* Caleb Jr. shook his head as his father answered the question, *society. That's where we live, all of us. And it's our job, you listening? OUR job, to join it after childhood and move it along.* Caleb Jr. then asked, *ok, but why? Why do we have to move it along at all?* Caleb Sr. was growing impatient, *because that's how it is. That's the system, that's how the system works. You work within it, you prosper. You work without it, you suffer. Money makes the world go 'round, Little Craig. It buys you a house, a car, and the ability to provide for your family. You don't like it, tough. That's just the way it is, and that's the way it has to be. Otherwise,* a sudden phone call interrupted his lecture, but getting up to take it, he finished with, *what's it all for?,* looking at his son with contempt. Caleb then went into another room, shut the door, and began to speak with his boss, saying, *I'm having dinner with my family, sir.* Only to be cut off with, *well, dinner's going to have to wait, Herzog. We have an urgent business to wrap up. Come meet with me at my residence, now. You know it well.* Then he hung up the phone. Caleb returned to the dining room, put on his coat, and told Jessica to take care of everyone until he returned from work, a high-level meeting with his boss at the man's house. Jessica nodded, understanding what her husband's job was like, then said to Caleb Jr., *see?,* pointing at his father, who'd just closed the front door and left the driveway, *that's what you can do when you listen to what other people tell you, and do what they want. You get everything that you want.* Caleb Jr. looked down, as usually happened every time he was steamrolled like this, and eventually, he stopped saying anything at all.

Caleb stepped into Tom Hobbes' living room only an hour later, but 20 minutes later than the CEO had demanded, much to the latter's annoyance. But he voiced it not, preferring, instead, to simply cut to the case. *We've lost contact with Victor in Seattle,* the boss began, *have you heard anything from him?* Caleb squirmed a little, then admitted that he hadn't been contacted in 2 days, saying that Victor usually didn't wait that long, unless something had gone awry. Hobbes pondered a moment, his eyes flitting to the phone on his side table, then asked, *has he heard about Anna yet?* Caleb replied, *I don't know, sir.* Hobbes changed not his expression, *hmm. Have your sources reported his death?* Caleb shook his head, and Hobbes lowered his own. Caleb then affirmed, *we've received no such indication, sir.* Hobbes then spoke, *then we should assume he's alive. And if that's true, and if he's cut contact with you, then we should also assume that he knows about his wife. Am I correct?* Caleb nodded eagerly, *always, sir.* Hobbes corrected his protege, *no, not always. And in case I am, I need you to go to Atlanta, have Anna*

moved here, hook her life support up to our grid, then phone the police. Tell them that we're going to catch a predator. But under no circumstances should they enter this house, until I have given them the signal. You understand? Caleb gave a swift, almost militaristic nod, but then asked, *sir, if I may ask,* Hobbes interjected, *you may,* then Caleb continued, *if something should happen to you…* But Hobbes cut him off again, *then you have the authority to act on my behalf. And here,* Hobbes got up from his chair and took a slip of paper from his side table drawer, handing it to Caleb, *this is yours. It states that upon my death, be it sooner or later, that the position of CEO, given that I have no next of kin, will pass to you.* Caleb looked up at his boss with an exceeding amount of pride and an oceanic volume of gratitude, then dropped to his knees and said, *I'm honored, sir.* But Hobbes simply pulled him up to his feet, smiled and said, *thank you for your service, our most valued employee. You've earned your promotions and your rewards. Every last one of them. However, should I come to an end sooner, there is one more thing that you will have to do in my stead,* Caleb nodded without a second thought, then declared, *anything, sir. I will do anything that you want me to do.* Then, Hobbes grinned again, and explained their need for a prophet.

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The hospital staff made no move to stop the activities of the second-highest representative of the organization from which they received a lion's share of their funding as he had their patient's equipment unplugged and moved to, what he called, "an intensive private care facility", out of state. Caleb was also sure to tell the staff, and the board, at the hospital to have the patient's husband know to find her at the disclosed address, which he did not tell them was the private residence of his boss. Paid handsomely for their work, and their discretion, the staff working that night questioned their designated superior not as he loaded up a borrowed air ambulance with Anna's unconscious body, her life support systems, and all of the drugs that could presently be afforded by her caregiver, Victor, that was to say, none, and together, with Caleb in the passenger's seat, and no further questions asked, the pair were flown all the way back to Indianapolis, and were made to remain at Hobbes' residence on the outskirts of the city, with Anna's life supports being promptly connected to the princely amounts of privately generated electrical power that surged through the house, devoid of tethers to the wider grid, making the home effectively immune to a large power failure, leaving his, in such an event, one of only a few islands of light within an ocean of darkness, all because he, too, had been rewarded by the system, just like his golden boy, who stationed himself in an adjacent room to Hobbes' personal seat of power, right on time for a Greyhound bus, coming from Seattle, to park at the station in Atlanta. And out of it, stepped Victor Koba, clutching the cure for cancer, whose maker followed him, gun in cloak, with 5 bullets left.

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Victor burst his way into the hospital while Asper lurked outside, awaiting his target's trajectory following the latter's exit. Within the hospital, Victor frantically searched room after room, following the revelation that Anna was not present in the chamber where she'd originally been. Everywhere he could think of he scanned for his wife, until he was stopped by a passing nurse,

who asked him what he was doing there. Victor then begged to know in what location lay Anna Koba, his wife, elaborating that he needed to see her, now. The nurse gave a knowing look, before informing him of Anna's relocation, relaying the given address to Victor, who promptly exited the building. Asper slunk behind him like a dark vaporous cloud, stalking the man until he followed him onto yet another Greyhound bus, this one, apparently, on its way north, to Indianapolis. Asper hazarded a guess or 2 as to the reason for this shift in direction, only for a quick internet search on his phone to lead him to the answer, one that had stared him in the face the entire time. He smiled more than he had ever before, giddy at the prospect of all of his enemies in one place with the cure he created, all while he was armed with more than enough bullets to take the bastards out, every single one of them. Then, an endgame began to gestate in his mind, with it resulting in 2 deaths, and his ascension to absolute power, at least, in the field of medicine, a castled throne from where he could truly be all of the change that he wanted to see in both the human and natural worlds. Tailing Victor, as he'd done before, Asper could barely contain his fury, malice, and anticipation, his prey being none the wiser as the bus passed night, day, and night again, until the final sunrise came against the backdrop of the city of Indianapolis. Yet, the journey ceased not there, for Victor disembarked the bus, only to be swiftly collected by an upscale car, driven by a man whom Asper did not recognize. Knowing that he could not follow the Mercedes directly, he quickly snapped a photograph of the license plate with his cell phone and took the picture to the last place that anyone would anticipate, including himself, the lawful authorities.

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So, you say this car was stolen?, asked the sitting desk officer. Asper had simply flashed the photo at the woman, and declared that it was his car, attempting to report it as a stolen vehicle. The officer then said, *ok, well, we'll need more to go on than just the plate. Do you have a copy of the registration? Do you have your driver's license?* Asper kept his mounting rage muzzled for the time being, saying nothing. The officer was unimpressed, but did offer something of use, *umm, ok, well, I can see that it's a company car.* However, that little tidbit of data was all Asper needed. There, in the police station, he got to work, determining the direction that the Mercedes had been travelling in, and cross-referencing this with the location of the Eli Lilly head offices, whose eggshell-hue halls and grey fabric cubicles sported no medical infrastructure, as he found out during his quick rush of research. In addition, those headquarters were located towards the center of the city, the opposite direction to where the car had been headed. That road was far away from any other hospitals as well, leaving just one place that Asper could think of. In his online digging, he found the name of the CEO of Eli Lilly, Tom Hobbes, and, more importantly, the city in which he, reportedly, maintained a residence, though he was sans a specific address. It all made sense to him now. Turning his attention back to the desk officer, who was plainly confused and a little exasperated by this stranger's eccentricities, Asper asked her a crucial question, *just out of curiosity, where does the CEO of Eli Lilly live? I did some research, and, apparently, he lives in this city, do you know where?* The officer, tired at this point and simply wanting the tedious conversation to be over with, informed Asper that it was kind of an open-secret around here, and remarked that Asper wasn't from Indianapolis, otherwise, he'd probably know. Then, without even thinking twice, given the billionaire status and the very public

image he'd cultivated over the years, Tom Hobbes' address was surrendered. Surprised at its ease of its acquisition, but, nonetheless, having the information he needed, Asper quickly left the police station without saying another word, plugged the address into Google Maps, and said to himself, under his breath, *bullseye.* Then, he returned outside, fingered around the adorning bushes, just beyond the cruiser parking lot, away from the prying eyes of the CCTV cameras that otherwise littered the area, and retrieved his stolen gun, safely hidden before he'd crossed the boundaries of state surveillance.

Victor didn't even ask why his wife was moved to such an exclusive location so far from home, not regarding anything except saving her life with the sole grain of hope that he held, the one sample of the only cure for cancer, at least, that he knew of. Making his way into the living room of Tom Hobbes, he was surprised at the appearance of the man, supposedly, in charge of it all, looking like a crazy professor at UC Berkeley or something. Alas, again, he cared nothing for it, only asking the man in the luxurious red-leather armchair, *where is she?* Hobbes looked over at Anna, whose vital monitor beeped from just behind an alcove in the wall to his left. *She's sleeping, right now,* he said, *and you may go to her. But first,* Hobbes interrupted Victor as he began towards his beloved, noticing the mysterious vial in his hand, *what've you got there?,* pointing at it. Victor steeled himself and revealed what the syringe's content was, to Hobbes' shock, and mild anger. The CEO knew what it might mean if this cure was to be effective in reviving Anna, at least, as long as someone else, unqualified, as he thought, was in control of it. Remaining polite, as he'd been conditioned to be by other human powers, calmly instructed Victor to hand him, a trained professional with many degrees and much experience, that cure for cancer, so that he might administer it "properly", as who else in this place could be more qualified than he? Victor then admitted to himself that Hobbes was probably correct, at least as far the rules were concerned. Seniority, after all, meant quite a bit, didn't it? Again, Victor didn't care, as long as this thing could save his wife. Walking over to Hobbes, he hesitantly handed him Asper Silva's cure. However, as soon as the vial left his fingers, the phalanges spasmed following the sound of a loud gunshot, then another in quick succession, ringing like a screaming child before the sound was silenced, the hot lead projectiles smothered in the flesh of Victor Koba, who bled, fell, and died, right in front of Hobbes, who quickly concealed the syringe in his pocket, just as a cloaked figure walked slowly and deliberately into the room, holding, in his right hand, a smoking gun, within it chambered only 3 more bullets. Asper Silva had come for his cure. But Hobbes had no idea whose face truly lay beneath that black, ratty hood.

---Hobbes---

Asper crouched down and searched Victor's body, but coming up empty, the man who cured cancer stood up and pointed his gun at Hobbes, who gave no indication to his adversary that he now held that cure in his khakis. *Where is it?,* the man in black hissed, *my vial. Where is it? This guy,* motioning towards Victor's dead body, *stole it from me. But now, I know he doesn't have it,* Asper narrowed his eyes, *which means that YOU do. Now, I'm going to ask you again, where is my vial!?,* he shouted now. Hobbes made a slight gesture with his fingers, unremarked by Asper, that signalled for Caleb, who watched from the adjacent room, to implement the "cop contingency" that they spoke of earlier, and to do so immediately. And despite his concerns, Caleb remembered that the police were not to enter the house under any circumstances until given the "all-clear" by either Hobbes or himself. He then ducked out of the room, into another, and dialed 911, all without Asper's knowledge, who yet still demanded that Hobbes give him his glass tube as he held his adversary at gunpoint. The still smoking barrel sent shiverers down its target's spine, but Hobbes remained calm, asking his attacker, *YOU created the cure for cancer?* Asper drew back the hammer of his gun, *so you know. Yes I did. My name is Asper Silva,* he said, his weapon untrembling. Hobbes, though, still considered something, even looking death in the face, and posed yet another question, *so you kill a man here, and make a life-saving medicine there. Can I ask why?* Asper stood silent for a moment, then responded, *a man can be 2 things at once. I can be as merciful as I can be merciless. The question is, on which side do other people place themselves? I can tell you right now, most people choose the bullet.* Hobbes recognized the intellect before him, and decided to delve deeper, if for no other reason than to stall for time while the police created a perimeter around his house. Additionally however, Hobbes believed that a mind that had created a cure for cancer demanded, at the very least, consideration, a mind that could become a great asset if its rage were tempered by, as he thought it, a better man, *it sounds like you make that choice in the end, my good gunman. But you have failed to answer my question. Why cure cancer when you clearly care nothing for your fellow man?* Asper seethed, *"my fellow man", could you be any more vain. I have no "fellow men". I owe nothing to a species that acts like a regime of glorified supremacist dictators that kills anything that it doesn't like, and passes it off as "no big deal" because what it's killed doesn't meet its vain and arbitrary definition of "sentience". A definition, by the way, that you fuckers concocted to make it ok to do whatever the fuck you want. So you can make guns, whoop-de-doo, you're still pieces of shit!* Hobbes understood, if only a little, of what Asper spoke. However, feeling his control over the situation beginning to slip, and his "good gunman" resisting a leash completely, Hobbes decided to go on the attack, matching his opponent's aggression, *do you see mice building skyscrapers? Conquering worlds? Curing cancer? Do you? No!,* he began to lose his composure and his declarations slowly morphed into yells from across the room as he stood up, thrusting himself from his armchair, his initial fear becoming fury, a very typical human response to a hooded cobra refusing to kowtow to another king, *we humans are different! Humans are better than animals! We are worth more, because we can build, think, and actually feel! We have souls, animals do not! With them, it's just instinct, brain chemistry, but with us, it's something more. I can feel it, you can feel it, and we deserve better than animals. Anyone who doesn't know that is asking for anarchy, violating the social contract,*

the pact between gods and men. The pact that YOU sign upon the drawing of your very first breaths. And I will not let anyone, ANYONE, break that pact. Not without consequences. Because there MUST be consequences for putting man down as an animal. Which we are not! Otherwise, there is no dignity, there is no sanity, and there is no civility! No civilization, and THAT, right there, is why we rule. Civilization. Kept together by OUR social contract, a contract bound to YOU, whether you like it or not! You belong to us all! All of mankind! You owe us!! You owe us everything!!! Asper could dam the torrent of his venom no longer, and with a flex of his index finger, the gun rattled off 2 rounds into Tom Hobbes' body, the first into his chest, tearing through his heart, the second into his forehead, barrelling through the meat between his ears. The man fell backward into his armchair, gurgled much blood from his mouth, and expired with a rattle in his throat. What had taken 62 years to construct was annihilated in a millisecond, a complex brain and personality both made completely irrelevant with just a fractional amount of strength held in the 4 inches of a single digit. And the most human human was killed by the most human weapon, wielded by the most inhuman hand. Asper lowered the gun, and spat at the carcass these simple words, *you're wrong, asshole. I owe you jack-shit.* But just then, in the wake of gunfire's echo, and Caleb's subsequent signal, into the room came streaming over a dozen armed police officers, one of whom had been the desk woman when Asper had gotten the address to this very house. That officer then yelled, *freeze! Stay right where you are and do not make any sudden moves! You are under arrest for the murder of CEO Tom Hobbes! I order you to put down the weapon and get on the ground, immediately!* Asper's mind then leaped back to what Hobbes had said earlier. Consequences. *No,* Asper muttered under his breath, *there will be no consequences. I do NOT belong to you, or anyone else. You will not take me, motherfucker,* looking into Hobbes' dead lightless eyes, *you will not take me alive.* Following this declaration, which the officers did not hear, and before they could react, Asper Silva swiftly put the gun to his head, drew back the hammer for the final time, and took his own life, killing himself before anyone or anything else could. His last words, uttered aloud, a split-second before he pulled the trigger, were blunt, *fuck you*, one last bird to the system that he despised, forever denying it its pound of withered flesh. The officers didn't even get off a single shot before Asper had taken his, and there died, by his own hand and his own will, the man who had cured cancer.

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Caleb Herzog witnessed the entire thing from his little hiding place nearby, not even able to speak before the officers announced that the shooter was dead, kicking away the gun before realizing that it was empty. Every bullet had found a body. The last one being the killer's own, which was gathered up, along with the carcasses of Tom Hobbes and Victor Koba, and taken to the coroner. Before the 3 men were hauled away though, a loud whine emitted from the room occupied by Anna Koba. The police investigated the noise, and found that her heart rate monitor had flatlined. Another victim of the one true god.

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That night, Caleb came to see the body of his former boss at the coroner's office, for he worshipped the man, even in death. And as he gazed at the corpse of his own god, he spied the vial of Asper Silva, still concealed in Hobbes' pants pocket. Looking to and fro before slipping his hand in, Caleb clandestinely recovered the cure for cancer from his former boss, whose will, weeks later, declared Caleb Herzog as the new CEO of Eli Lilly, the best employee that there had ever been, it was said, in the history of the entire company.

In his hospital-church, on his knees, he raised his arms aloft, praying to the god that he'd come to know was omnipresent and all powerful. As Ezekiel bowed his head and rose from his prostration, the doors behind him clanged open, and 4 people in white collars emerged from the light, like angels sent thereforth by the will of the only power that mattered anymore. Turning to them, he asked, *who comes to the house of thy god, praise be to Lord Carcinoma?* The 4 suits then looked at each other, nodded, and thus spoke the tallest one, *yes, praise be unto his name. Now, do you remember the conditions of your release?* Ezekiel responded, *yes, I do. But the man is dead, his alleged cure for God has been taken with him. I have done my penance to our Lord and now only seek to further his good works.* The Middle-Man, the tallest, then stated, *right. But wrong, in more ways than one. For the cure is, indeed, real. Mr. Hobbes had recovered it from its source before he died.* Ezekiel looked perplexed, asking, *what source?* The suits looked at one another again, but more seriously this time. The Middle-Man then responded, *rodents, my friend, rodents. However, the method of sourcing has required some improvisations. And you, prophet, can help us by preaching your gospel, of our Lord, Carcinoma.* Ezekiel smiled, asking nothing more of the cure or its connection to Tom Hobbes, the man who'd freed him to continue The Lord's work. Carcinoma's pope then asked, *how may our church serve you, then?* The Middle-Man responded, *that's actually our first order of business, prophet. How would you like for your organization to be officially dubbed The Church of Cancer?* Ezekiel couldn't believe what he was hearing, just weeks ago, he was rotting in a mental hospital, and now, he was being given the recognition that he so desperately believed was necessary to reach the people that he'd been trying, all along, to save, to warn, to lead. And this time, with Hobbes' words, and uplifting, still fresh in his mind, The Prophet of Cancer readily agreed to the terms of The Middle-Man and his accompanying suits, no further questions asked.

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Those terms were these, as they were laid out in a board room of Eli Lilly-

Ezekiel and The Church of Cancer are to preach the following message…

1-Cancer can be cured, and no one has to die to become free of Lord Carcinoma's kingdom, as long as he is properly worshipped, appeased, and obeyed.

2-If the people become Touched, then they can be cured if they can also pay $6,000 for it. This shows that they can pay their way and proves that they are contributing to society in a meaningful way.

3-If the Touched cannot afford this price, then they are to make a donation to The Church of Cancer in the form of an t-cell donor that is their next of kin, someone young and healthy enough to be eligible.

Besides these however, the other elements of Ezekiel's doom-sermons, those of the initial state of the church, were to remain unaltered. The only difference was that salvation was to come in a more agreeable guise. The high-priest accepted the terms, and was, for his trouble, granted a yearly sum of $500,000,000 to "do The Lord's work" as well as he could. And in not long, the church had not only purchased the old hospital, in which Ezekiel had founded the religion, but had also become a muli-million dollar media empire, spreading carcinophobia, hypochondria, and health anxiety to all who, as of yet, had remained unafflicted by Phobos's crippling touch.

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However, the fact that the public now "understood" that the cure for cancer had been created via typical rodent experiments, never once even mentioning the name of Asper Silva in discourse surrounding it, did not change the reality that the method of sourcing, created by The Underground Scientist, remained unalterable, for a synthesis, at this point, was simply impossible, thus the reason for the "donations" necessitated by The Church of Cancer. The t-cells had to come from somewhere, after all. However, this was plainly unknown to Ezekiel, who remained ignorant as to the purposes of these "donations". This was just as unknown to the parishioners, a list of whom that was ever-lengthening day by day, who were handed over to Eli Lilly after being selected by their poor and Touched relatives for the intention of harvesting t-cells from those most vulnerable. The natural killer cells were subsequently injected into ancient wealthy barons willing and able to shell out small fortunes for the privilege of living just a little while longer, keeping their respective donors on the sites of the sacrifices, their Great Templo Mayors, for the remainder of the human chattel's, ultimately, doomed lives. However, their earthly connections were told, by one who believed it, that they'd, in fact, escaped Carcinoma's kingdom, by the grace of the church, and their parent company, Eli Lilly. And that company never revealed the name of Asper Silva, or what he had designed to do with the cure that he was responsible for creating, and was not once given credit for it. His body was callously cremated and scattered in some non-descript industrial field without even being given a eulogy.

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His former test subjects, the humans that Asper had been keeping in the Seattle Underground, were never located. And, one by one, they each slowly starved to death, reduced to rotting carrion left to linger in their canine cages. The corpse of Athena Tang also succumbed to

nature's decay, becoming nothing more than food for the flies. Their loved ones were never addressed, being completely ignored for the rest of officially recorded history.

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15 years later…

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The Church of Cancer was growing exponentially, with its founder, Ezekiel, being hailed as a religious icon, spoken of in conversation involving the likes of Jesus, Muhammad, Abraham, and Joseph Smith of elder days. Such an elevation in reputation had not gone unnoticed by one who'd previously been a condemner of Cancer's Prophet, one whose own wife was the first, and last, to be killed by Ezekiel, back in the days when the church was still, officially, branded a cult.

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Gerald Dumont, widowed husband of Alice, had received the terrible diagnosis, terminal colorectal cancer at the age of 78. However, rather than linger and die in the cold steel arms of some unsympathetic hospital bed, he decided to come to The Church of Cancer, headquartered in the city of Chicago, wherein he met with his wife's killer for the first time. Ezekiel, who was now aged 45, just a decade younger than Gerald's late wife at the time of her sacrifice, whom he recalled upon his meeting with the high priest, understood that since Gerald was unwealthy, and thus could not afford the steadily ascending price of the cure for cancer, he was to be released from Carcinoma's Kingdom, along with his 29 year old son, his chosen donor, and admitted into the bless'd halls of Eli Lilly, so that he may reunite with his wife in death, forever free from The Lord's touch. And so, beyond the door of life he was taken. His son, never aware of what would follow, was imprisoned within the laboratories of Ezekiel's parent company, not to his father's knowledge, who waited days to see his wife. And, at long last, after 5 weeks of unceasing agony that radiated from his core, Gerald Dumont died alone, for his bank account balance of only a few thousand dollars had deemed him unworthy of continued existence in the eyes of the system, according to the design of Tom Hobbes, whose legacy had long passed to his "golden boy", Caleb Herzog, who, in turn, was deemed, by the company, as the most successful man in the history of the world.

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20 years later…

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Dubbed an official religion and formally acknowledged by the catholic pope after over 30 years of indecision by the existing religious institutions of the world, The Church of Cancer fast became the largest faith on the planet, far surpassing Christianity in its number of devoted

adherents, for, as Ezekiel, now 75, had said many years ago, cancer was the only god that was proven to affect, then take, life, lending more legitimacy to its existence, the first god that people could actually see, feel, and fear. The effigy of Lord Carcinoma, drawn by Ezekiel during his imprisonment in the mental institution, reigned over the concrete and wooden structures of the world, like an omnipresent flag of death, black, hooded, and sinister, like the grim reaper of ages long dead and faded from memory. And at this long era, the man who'd planted Carcinoma's pope in that institution of isolation and condemnation, arose again, and reconnected with the former criminal, Detective Peter Jobe, who'd first been Ezekiel's interrogator, but now embraced the church that the seemingly crazed arrestee had created. Peter became friends with Ezekiel upon their rekindling of connection, and ere long, the former had left his retirement from the police force, and 'come to be the highest acolyte of The Church of Cancer, and not a moment too soon, as its founder, not but a pair of years later, suffered a sudden aneurysm and died, to the unfading grief of all mankind.

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Peter Jobe was uplifted to the status of Pope Peter upon his predecessor's death, immediately after which the founder was canonized, by his church, as Saint Ezekiel, one of the greatest religious founders in history, eternally archived in the annals of the faith. And eventually, the new Pope followed his friend to the bladed edge of the reaper's scythe, and so was canonized as the first of his name and the protector of the legacy. Saint Peter, they called him, Keeper of the Keys to Carcinoma's kingdom.

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10 years later…

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Reclining in a lavish beach chair on the cusp of a large pool in a Floridian resort, Caleb Herzog, long-time CEO of Eli Lilly, breathed his last, as the beats within his chest suddenly began to accelerate to an irregular and uncontrolled rhythm of rapidity. Then, all at once, they fell silent, leaving the man, whose alma mater of Harvard University was chosen to be credited with the creation of the cure for cancer, to die with dignity at the coveted age of 100.

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However, while Caleb Herzog had died, his company, and its accompanying church, did not. Ever so quietly however, they both began to rot from within, as prices for salvation steadily began to soar in the nigh-century of the cure's existence, with time-ground inflation a constant crown of thorns, given ever more a firm thrashing with the advent of longer human lives, facilitated by their curing of cancer, and thus extending the already considerable toll taken by almighty time. Accentuating, and all the while exploiting, this toll were those who'd endeavored to fuel its rise. Oil was drilled for and poisoned the air via the exhaust of cars and the fumes of

factories, making their way into the bodies and systems of those forced by circumstance to breathe them in. Food derived from chemicals as synthetic as those that composed the stacks of stratified building material from which they were pumped, created, in conjunction with cars, of oil's accretion, a population, ever inflating, of plump, decadent, and rotund apes who were perfectly content to live passively, worshipping their cancerous god, that which ultimately touched their fattened bodies. All the while, the populace was subjected to a popular culture of contentment and passivity, which was further entrenched by mainstream media outlets, whose features, programmes, and news stories promoted the aforementioned vices, as did the fellow men of those glued to the screens upon which their eyes remained affixed, glazed over as shiny, over-stuffed doughnuts in a depressive malaise, looking for any light-hearted or narcotic-enabled escape from their brutal reality. And in step with this most chief of human desires came the conglomerations known, collectively, as big pharma, the overlord of which, Eli Lilly, through its Church of Cancer, hawked its unobtainable cures, overpriced checkups, incessant cancer screenings, oil-bled remedies, poppy-derived pain pills, and vampiric insurance partners for greater and greater gains. And riding on the backs of all of this were the governments of the human world, The United States, China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and countless others, working as one all-encompassing eldritch entity, wrapping its caustic tendrils around the planet and juicing it of blood, breath, and life. This culminated in the reaping of immense profits heretofore gathered by their anointed Saint, Ezekiel, whose name was, permanently attached to the cure created in Seattle, whose true maker was, at this point, completely unknown to the metastasizing populace, a cure sold only to those of that populace who were bureaucratically qualified for its reception, and who could afford to pay the newly-raised price of $10,000 for a syringe, whose contents were now deliberately diluted after harvesting, to cut costs and to ever so slightly dull its effectiveness, keeping the ever-increasing number Touched coming back for more, and thus the cycle continued to wheel 'round, and the world continued to spin, in spite of it all.

In the end, The Church of Cancer took over the world, its endlessly succeeding high priests telling everyone to worry about their food, their surroundings, and their health, told to watch out for every symptom that could indicate cancer, however minor, to get regular checkups and screenings, and to take no shortage of other drugs, supplied by Eli Lilly, to "keep themselves healthy", for, as Saint Ezekiel had always proclaimed, Lord Carcinoma is always watching, he lives in all things, and inside all of you. Life became a prison, wardened by Carcinoma's line of Popes, the keepers of the keys to his kingdom, his dungeon, his panopticon, from which there was no escape. His effigy was omnipresent, his word asphyxiated every ear, and his fingers were embedded in every inch of skin, muscle, and bone. Every mark, every mole, and every pain was his signature, his blight, his curse, his ire, drawn to all whose birth was upon this world. His armies, indeed, crawled beneath flesh and nails, wormed into bone and brain, and writhed inside of eyes and throats. All were helpless, powerless, and crippled into obese invalids by convention, momentum towed against their will, and the unrelenting, oppressive crush of that rolling stone called fear. All it took, it was popularly said, was one misstep in your constant genetic replication to become touched by the one true god, the lord of the world, and all those

who dwelt upon it, the emperor of maladies, the king of hypochondria, the malignant monarch, the stony, unflinching crab of the star-sign, cancer. And there, from his almighty throne of time, he sat, looking down from beyond the starry void of the universe at the little world, holding all upon it within the grip of his ruthless fingers. A black hole of screaming minds, bodies, and souls begging for just one thing, and that was freedom, the only form of it left, and that was death. They all begged for death. And The Lord said unto them, *no.*

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And against the sweltering, smog-choked backdrop of all of this, gleamed the glassy bronze-cast eyes of Caleb Herzog, a glorified man. Immortalized on the company statue and placard, were, as everyone was taught, his last ever words, the regurgitations of Tom Hobbes. For never were they his successor's own, as even in death, Caleb Herzog, conformity personified, was nothing more than what he had always been, a means to a bitter end.

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And upon the placard, caked in oily black dust, and entombed at the feet of the statue, were embossed these final words…

---Epilogue-The Declaration of Tom Hobbes---

Keep calm…

And have fun in the sun…

(sponsored) just be sure to buy sunscreen from your friends at Johnson and Johnson…

Don't worry…

Be happy…

(sponsored) just be sure to get that mole checked at your local MedExpress…

It's ok…

You're in good hands…

(sponsored) with Eli Lilly…

And may you live long…

With hope and prayer…

(sponsored) by the will or grace of the Lord thy God.

For those who need a reason...

It's not about the votes, it's about who counts them
-The Man of Steel

It's not about god, it's about the only god
It's not about who creates it, it's about who controls it
It's not about sacrifice, it's about salvation
It's not about disease, it's about dystopia
And it's not about who's right, it's about who's king

For one's logic is another's insanity
One's cult is another's church
One's illness is another's opportunity
One's kingdom is another's dungeon
And one's fantasy is another's reality

Let reason be the judge...